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THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE OF U.S. VETERANS FROM  
MILITARY LIFE TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Mark Anthony McKinney

THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE OF U.S. VETERANS FROM  
MILITARY LIFE TO HIGHER EDUCATION

**Abstract**

Transitioning from military service always has been an inevitable part of serving in the United States military. With the recent end of military operations in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, transitioning from military service and entering higher education has become commonplace. However, the lived experiences of United States military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education within the past five years are not clearly understood. Consequently, higher education institutions may not possess information necessary to assist U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service within the specified timeframe.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the lived experiences of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. The application of social constructivism to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory and Schlossberg's 4 S Model (Amineh & Davatgari, 2015; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006), for the theoretical framework, with an online survey and interviews (Creswell, 2015) as the methods of data collection, four themes expressed participants' experiences transitioning from military service to higher education: planning for transition, awareness of the transition, support during the transition, and transitional situation awareness.

The findings of this study may be utilized to inform higher education faculty, staff, and administrators about what U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experience while

transitioning from military service to higher education. Educational professionals can use use this information to examine, revise, expand, and/or prepare support mechanisms for these students upon their entry into higher education.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Educational Leadership

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For the military veterans who volunteered for my study, being able to study them has been a tremendous honor in that I can assist these veterans in research that may be used to advance higher education success for military veterans.

As a military veteran who has made the transition from military service to higher education, I realized that I was not alone with the emotions and experiences that I encountered. I am so glad I could relate to their struggles and lend a helping hand. Hopefully, through the results of this study, some good will come from it. If I am able to help just one military veteran or one institution or military organization so a military veteran can successfully make the transition, then all of this work will be worth my efforts.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In the history of the United States, the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 linked a relationship between higher education and the military through curriculum-based military training at federally financed institutions (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). This relationship, initially established through passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, created a linkage between higher education and the military through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill provided service members and veterans with a source of funding to pursue higher education and training opportunities (Ortiz, 2012). However, although higher education and the military have developed a symbiotic relationship, the military veteran may experience difficulties associated with the process of transitioning from military service to higher education (Livingston et al., 2011).

The American Psychological Association (2007) noted in a report titled, *The psychological needs of U.S. military service members and their families: A preliminary report.*, that "military veterans possess a level of grief from their military service that demands adjustments from themselves as well as their family members" (p. 25). Military veterans are accustomed to making adjustments to a multitude of differing situations associated with military service, which was a part of military life (Layne, 2016; Thomas & Bowie, 2016). However, when transitioning from military service to higher education, military veterans' experience many difficulties. These difficulties included becoming re-acclimated (Spencer, 2016, p. 57); adjusting to newly acquired injuries or ailments (Ahern et al, 2014, p. 2); and dealing with the major transition of switching from military service to higher education (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2014; Grossman, 2009).

## **Background**

According to Sportsman and Thomas (2015), “the initial level of transition was challenging because the United States spends immense amounts of money and time preparing service members to be a part of a military force and training them for combat” (p. 44). Also, “the reintegration of citizens back into their civilian lives has typically received only a small fraction of the resources committed to their development into soldiers” (Cordesman & Burke, 2012, p. 95). In some circumstances, some military veterans were able to readjust to civilian life rather well; however, “while more than seven-in-ten veterans (72%) report they had an easy time readjusting to civilian life, 27% say re-entry was difficult for them—a proportion that swelled to 44% among veterans who served in the ten years since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks” (Morin, 2011, p.1).

In addition to the issues concerning civilian society reintegration, when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition from military service and go back to civilian life after they complete their military service obligation, some take with them newly acquired injuries or ailments as a result of military service. Thomas and Bowie (2016) articulated “thirty percent of the veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan reportedly had difficulty coping with the invisible wounds of war such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)” (p. 313). The prevalence of newfound ailments and injuries paved the way for "potential long-term impact and burden of health problems as a result of military service" (Ahern et al., 2014, p. 2) that accompanied the military veteran during their transition to higher education.

According to Grossman (2009) and Church (2009), the majority of 2.6 million Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) combat veterans returned with

disabilities as a result of their service. One such challenge for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans was that they needed institutional accommodations during the transition. Ford and Vignare (2015), stated that U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans had “functional impairments or physical, emotional and cognitive challenges, which in turn, impacted their interactions, experiences and academic performance, both online and in face-to-face classrooms” (p. 9). These conditions were “the single greatest challenge facing veterans transitioning into academic environments” (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011, p. 65). Further, “some military veterans with physical or psychological readjustment challenges... required academic and disability accommodations to reintegrate into society and academia successfully” (Cook & Kim, 2009, p. 1).

To understand the process of transitions, Lazarowicz (2015) articulated that it was important to understand the circumstances in the adult individual’s life and its impact. Moreover, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were accustomed to “a standard of expectations, conduct and governance” and their transitional experiences were unique (Cunha & Curran, 2013). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, being held to a higher standard was established through Professional Military Education (PME) (Abbe & Haplin, 2009). The higher standard was brought about through military service members becoming a part of a time-honored tradition of military training prior to each service member being determined fit for military service (Abbe & Haplin, 2009; Cunha & Curran, 2013). PME includes formal military educational courses geared towards the development of military personnel in operational and cultural settings and based on doctrine established by the Department of Defense (DoD) (Abbe & Haplin, 2009). As a result of PME and other experiences, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military

veterans conducted themselves differently than traditional students who were younger and inexperienced (Abbe & Haplin, 2009; Lazarowicz, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The experiences of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education within the past five years has not been closely investigated and are not well understood. Furthermore, higher education institutions did not possess the information necessary to assist U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service within the specified timeframe. If higher education institutions were unable to assist this student population from start to finish, then higher education was not successful in accomplishing one of its primary goals, student retention (Chaleunphonh, 2015; Mindrup, 2012). Increased research provided depth to the knowledge base and increased military service and higher education institutional practices and policy making.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to investigate the lived experiences of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the main research question: What was the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education? In support of the main research question were the following sub-questions: What were U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans' perceptions of the transitional experience into higher education? How did U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in the selected sample describe the influence of their military experiences upon their transition from

military service to higher education? How did the select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in the study describe experiences that connected to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory?

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The researcher approached this study from a phenomenological theoretical perspective rooted in the epistemology of social constructivism. In social constructivism, individuals asserted meaning through their world interactions, all the while considering social stimuli through those interactions (Rumann, 2010a). Further, through social constructivism, "meaningful learning occurred when individuals were engaged in social activities such as interaction and collaboration" (Amineh & Davatgari, 2015, p. 13). By utilizing a phenomenological theoretical perspective in tandem with social constructivism, the researcher intended to explicate U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans' transitional experience from military service to higher education. The themes identified were unique and support the transitional experiences encountered during the lived experiences of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans.

The theoretical framework for this research study was supported by the application of Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transition (1981) as the transitional experiences of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans played an important role in their transitional experiences from military service to higher education. In dealing with the challenges of transitioning from military service to higher education, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans underwent the 4 S's of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). This theory defined the inner workings of adult transition and identified ways to cope with the difficult adult transitions (Anderson et al., 2014). Schlossberg's 4 S's entail *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategies*.

Through these four areas, people in transition “navigate the transition by taking stock of the situation and the available coping resources” (Ford & Vignare, 2015, p. 5). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education, there were only three research studies in which the lived experiences of military veterans transitioning to higher education were investigated (Ackerman & Mitchell, 2008; Bauman, 2009; Layne, 2016). Increased research is needed relating to what U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experience while transitioning from military service to higher education. Thus, this study focused on the essence of the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education.

To conduct the research, the researcher collaborated with the President/CEO of Fairways for Warriors. Fairways for Warriors is a 501c (3) not-for-profit organization located in Kissimmee, Florida who “provides hope, healing, and camaraderie for combat wounded veterans and their families” (<http://fairwaysforwarriors.org>, 2017, p. 1). This organization has 250 members, with three chapters in three states.

### **Assumptions**

In this study, there were several assumptions regarding the researched population that the researcher considered. First, the researcher assumed the participants would be truthful in responding to survey and interview questions. Another assumption was that the elements of Schlossberg’s 4S’s were universal and applied to the transition process for military veterans. Also, regarding the use of a phenomenological approach, the researcher assumed that the study’s selection process ensured a breadth of experiences from individuals with varying military service experiences and varied transitional experiences to higher education. Regarding the use of the constructivist philosophy, the researcher assumed the survey and interview questions were

constructed in such a way to allow the participants to construct meaning in their individual experiences and that the researcher was able to identify themes among the varied interpretations each participant made of their individual experiences.

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations to the design of the study. One limitation was that only individuals who transitioned from military service and entered higher education within the last five years were utilized as participants. This limitation allowed individuals who completed college and those who were still enrolled in the sample, just as long as they met the requirements of transitioning within the last five years.

Another potential limitation was the bias of the researcher. The researcher's membership in the organization where he obtained study participants increased rapport among research participants, but also presents opportunity for bias. One way the researcher reduced bias in the study was to engage in self-reflection through recording his thoughts throughout the process. Also, research findings for this study were limited to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education in the last five years; not all transitioning U. S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were characterized by this research.

### **Scope**

The scope of this study was confined to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who were members of Fairways for Warriors and transitioned from military service to higher education in the last five years.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study can be used to inform higher education faculty, staff, and administrators about what U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experience while

transitioning from military service to higher education. Educational professionals could use this information to examine, revise, expand, and/or prepare support mechanisms for these students upon their entry into higher education. The findings from this study also assist future veterans making the transition from military service to higher education. Lastly, study results provide educational scholars, researchers, and policy developers with tangible information they can use to expand and develop methods to assist U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education a fruitful and productive experience.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**ADA.** Refers to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 “with respect to an individual with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities” (Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Regulation, 2010, p. 30), which also pertains to accommodations provided by educational institutions.

**COIN.** Refers to a term created during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) where the U.S. military engaged in a comprehensive military effort to defeat an insurgency organized to create subversion and violence or to nullify or challenge political control of Iraq.

**G.I. Bill.** Refers to a legislative bill formally known as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, established during World War II and is a Department of Veterans Affairs education benefit designed to aid service members and eligible veterans to cover the costs of receiving education or training.

**Higher Education.** Refers to postsecondary education beyond high school, specifically to 2-year, 4-year education that grants degrees, certificates, and certifications.

**Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).** Refers to a U.S. military operation in Iraq, which began on March 20, 2003, and concluded in December 2011 (Ford & Vignare, 2015).



**Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).** Refers to a U.S. military operation in Afghanistan that began on October 7, 2001 (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

**Operation New Dawn (OND).** Refers to a U.S. military operation designated by the Department of the Defense regarding American military presence in Iraq after September 1, 2010 (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

**Post 9/11 Veterans.** Refers to veterans serving in the U.S. armed forces on active duty after September 11, 2001. These veterans are eligible for education benefits as a result of the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** Refers to a mental health condition classified by the American Psychological Association (APA), which include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety about the event that caused the ailment (APA, 2007).

**Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC).** Refers to a collective group of college-based military officers training programs for training commissioned officers for service the U.S. Armed Forces.

**Student Veterans.** Refers to any college student who has served on active duty in the armed forces in a war zone, (i.e., Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.), who has now enrolled in a community college seeking a two-year degree. Specifically, for the purpose of this study, the focus is on military veterans who have served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation New Dawn.

**Traumatic Brain Injury.** Refers to a brain condition whereas the brain is exposed to a blunt force trauma. Specifically, for this study, the focus is on military veterans who may have suffered a TBI from a concussive blast from an IED or other explosive device while serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation New Dawn (Zoroya, 2007).

## **Military Acronyms**

The following acronyms are military terms used by participants in this study during data collection and referred to in this study:

**BCT.** Basic Combat Training

**ETS.** Expiration Term of Service

**IED.** Improvised Explosive Device

**MRB.** Medical Review Board

**PME.** Professional Military Education

**DoD.** Department of Defense

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education. The findings of the study provide higher education administrators, faculty members, and staff as well as policymakers and researchers with information regarding the transitional experiences of this student population. Chapter 3 presents the methodology, setting of the study, participants, data collection and data analysis utilized by the researcher. The chapter includes ethical considerations, participant rights, and limitations. Chapter 4 presents the results of data interpretation and summarizes the results. Chapter 5 discusses findings, implications, and recommendations of the study. This final chapter also addresses recommendations and conclusions identified as a consequence of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Chapter 2 commences with the conceptual framework of the study and then highlights four essential areas that supports the research topic: U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans and higher education; transition theory and military veteran transitions; and military veteran issues in higher education. The chapter concludes with a summation of the importance of this information towards the research topic.

The literature review applied the theoretical perspective of social constructivism to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Model and then to Schlossberg's 4 S model. The literature review highlighted past and present situations involving U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in higher education from an Iraq and Afghanistan War perspective, while summarizing information related to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Through discussing Schlossberg's Adult Transition theory and how it relates to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans departing military service and entering higher education, the literature focused on military veteran challenges in higher education and military veteran transitions.

Through blending existing literature on the topic researched (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014), each phenomenon describes supplemental information regarding the experience of a select sample U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in higher education. This literature review supported the following main and supporting research questions: What was the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education? In support of the main research question were the following sub-questions: What were U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans' perceptions of the transitional

experience into higher education? How did U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in the selected sample describe the influence of their military experiences upon their transition from military service to higher education?

Making the transition from the military to a college environment is challenging no matter how it is approached. During a military veteran's transition from military service to higher education, "the ability to adapt and improvise becomes central to the reality" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 10). Thus, understanding the perspective of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans was important to developing and providing supportive tools during the transition process (Church, 2009; DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Providing and developing supportive tools includes support from the military and from higher education institutions (Heineman, 2016; Semer & Harmening, 2015).

As U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition from "the highly structured and regimented culture of the military to the more ambiguous and self-regulated environment associated with postsecondary education" (Ford & Vignare, 2015, p. 5), the acquired sense of belonging or fit, intent to persist (Falcone, 2011) from the military transferred to the institution the military veteran attends. Further, when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans "become integrated, they feel like they belong, thus stimulating student adoption of campus norms and culture" (Wolf-Wendle, Ward & Kinzine, 2009, p. 425). Nonetheless, many U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans return either from combat or from serving a large portion of their adult life in the military and transition into higher education. The transition process was challenged; however, regardless of their experiences, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans needed support to make their transition successful (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Consequently, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans must understand the nature of their transition; understand

that the transition was difficult, and access all the resources at their disposal, which involved reaching out to the institution they were entering and becoming acclimated to the community at large (Layne, 2016; Williams, 2016).

In transitioning from military service to higher education Brewer (2016) indicated “there was lacking research regarding military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education” (p. 35). This study aimed to fill that void by examining the transition experience from military to higher education as experienced by a select pool of military veteran students who made that transition. Schlossberg’s Adult Transition theory was a comprehensive model for analyzing human adaptation to transition (Schlossberg, 1981). This theory spotlighted the intricacies of a major life transition (Rumman, 2010b). Lastly, the inclusion of Schlossberg’s 4 S’s (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) in the Adult Transition Theory defined the inner workings of adult transition and ways to cope with the transition (Anderson et al., 2014).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The researcher’s approach to this study was from a theoretical perspective rooted in the epistemology of social constructivism. In social constructivism, researchers assert that meaning is made through their participants’ lived interactions, all the while considering cultural stimuli through those interactions (Rumann, 2010a). Amineh and Davatgari (2015) articulated that understanding social constructivism was best accomplished “when individuals are engaged in social activities such as interaction and collaboration” (p. 13). This aspect of social constructivism was particularly relevant for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans as within their current situation, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans adapted to the transitional process and dynamically adapted through knowledge of the real world (Liu & Chen, 2010). Additionally, through social constructivism, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans

were able to “construct reality with those belonging to our social circle” (Ultanir, 2012, p. 195) and face the rigors of transitioning from military service to another desired situation (Liu & Chen, 2010; Schlossberg, 1981).

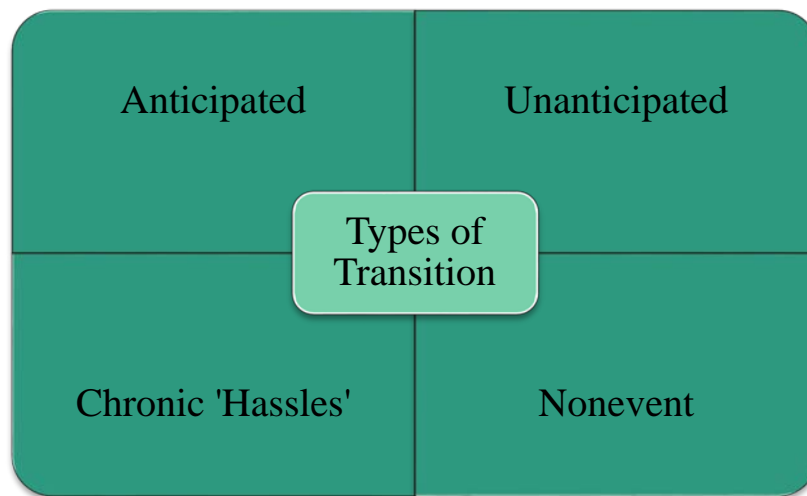
Through connecting the phenomenological theoretical perspective with social constructivism, the researcher concentrates on the lived experiences of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans to clarify their transition experiences. Furthermore, “suspending past knowledge and experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 331) of transitioning from military service to higher education to understand enhances the opportunities to identify themes of the lived experience that were unique and influence the actions and decisions of transitioning.

### **Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory**

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory as a framework for this study was geared to investigate the transitional experience of going from military service to higher education for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans (Anderson et al., 2014; Schlossberg, 1981). In the armed forces, “being a part of a team is integral to military culture, and each member of the team is essential” (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 42). This was further supported by Schlossberg (2014) who indicates that “mattering means being appreciated and depended upon” (p. 1). Regarding Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory, a correlation was established with the military veteran’s relationship with their transition and how they coped with the associated experiences (Lazarowicz, 2015; Livingston et al., 2011). Schlossberg’s 1984 Adult Transition Theory identifies "four types of transitions: (a) *anticipated*, (b) *unanticipated*, (c) *chronic 'hassles,'* and (d) *non-event*" (Livingston et al., 2011, p. 317). Schlossberg’s theory provides four common transitions U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans encounter when departing military service (Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell, 2009; Livingston, 2009). In order to examine the

transition experience from military service to higher education of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, the scholarly application of Schlossberg's Theory, which includes Schlossberg's 4 S's model, was an essential element of this definitive analysis.

Figure 2.1 - Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory



The application of Schlossberg's Transition Theory was important when addressing the transitional needs of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans. Schlossberg's Transition Theory served as the foundation in understanding the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Schlossberg's theory provides useful tools "to facilitate increased coping and adaptation to change" (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 41). Through making adjustments to their changing environment, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans "had a difficult time adjusting from their old situation to a new and unfamiliar situation" (Layne, 2016, p. 13). A primary reason for such a difficulty was the difference between military and civilian environments (Granger, 2016; Layne, 2016). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, the "military is a distinctly hierarchal environment, one posing significant challenges when service members leave" (Jones, 2013, p. 11) and when transitioning, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans have to adopt a

civilian identity (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Jones, 2013).

Schlossberg's theory was utilized to emphasize stages of the transition that considered when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition from military service (Rumann, 2010a; Rumann, 2010b). The different stages associated with Schlossberg's theory were applicable to what U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans encountered when they transitioned to higher education and civilian life (Rumann, 2010b; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). The first stage, *anticipated* transition (Livingston et al., 2011, p. 317), involved "major events that were expected, such as graduating from high school or college, marriage, or starting a career" (Pendleton, 2007, p. 8). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, a major event involved an announced deployment or readiness training exercise, thus allowing preparation for the upcoming event. Also, an event was regarded as *major* when the service member either retired or came to their Expiration of Term of Service (ETS). The military informs service members directly, demarcating this event. The formal notice allows a better transition process, making adaptation more tolerable but still difficult (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Wolfe, 2012). Upon informing the service member of the end of their military service, each branch of the military provided pre-separation counseling and military transition assistance (Wolfe, 2012).

Regarding an *unanticipated* transition (Livingston et al., 2011, p. 317), the person experiences an unexpected transition through a life event that disrupts their normal routine, and typically involves a crisis or the inability to plan for the event (Pendleton, 2007, p. 8). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, this occurred more frequently than the other transitions. For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, Sheppard, Malatras, and Israel (2010), indicated that "since September 11, 2001, American service members deployed nearly 3.3 million times to



a combat zone ... which was unprecedented considering the significant decrease in the size of the military over the past 25 years” (p. 600). An example was when a military veteran receives unexpected orders reassigning them to another unit at another installation. Another example, expressed by Van Dusen (2011), occurred when a military service member was discharged involuntarily or suffers significant injury from combat service and was disqualified from military service.

The third type of transition, *chronic hassles*, was, according to Schlossberg (1984), events that “prevent individuals from making a change” (as cited in Livingston et. al, 2011, p. 326). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, chronic hassles or stressors occur when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans deal with military memories of their service and cannot adapt to their new life as a civilian or as a student (Livingston et al., 2011, p. 317). Further, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans encountered problematic issues associated with fitting back into society (i.e., driving, financial management, etc.) (Church, 2009; Livingston et al., 2011). These concerns appeared simplistic in nature, but for some veterans, transitioning to the civilian world was very challenging after serving for such a long time in the military (Berrett, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009).

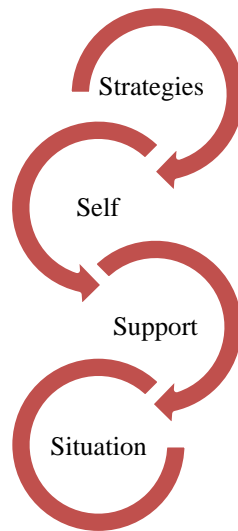
Leibowitz and Schlossberg (1982) indicated that during the fourth type of transition in Schlossberg’s theory, *nonevent* or *non-occurrence* (Livingston et al., 2011, p. 317), individuals in “non-occurrence situations felt boxed in and depressed” (p. 14) thus making the transition increasingly difficult. For military personnel, an example of a non-event transition was when the military veteran looked forward to transitioning to a specific university/college and this plan did not materialize (Ortiz, 2012; Wolfe, 2012). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, this occurs relatively often as U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were taught to plan their

actions, and were disappointed when those plans failed to materialize (Cook & Kim, 2009; Jones, 2013; Layne, 2016).

For example, most U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans utilized their G.I. Bill education benefits to assist with the financial commitments, but the bureaucracy associated with distributing the funds often became cumbersome and caused difficulty for veterans (Cunningham, 2012; Vance & Miller, 2009). When appropriate support for the transition was in place, problematic issues were reduced or eliminated, thus avoiding transitional shock (Carne, 2011). Tobolowsky, McClellan, and Cox (2014) determined students often encountered transition shock, which necessitated students dealing with the seriousness of the transition process; however, additional pressure was brought to bear when they analyzed the potential of failure in their educational endeavors. According to Carne (2011), U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans encountered culture shock associated with reintegration and transition from serving in the military (p. iv).

**Schlossberg's 4 S's Model.** An important part of Schlossberg's Transition Theory was the 4 S's. According to Rumann (2010a), Schlossberg's 4 S's consisted of four factors that affected peoples' ability to cope with transitions: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (p. 29). The 4 S's served as essential tools when adults go through transitions. For transitioning U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, applying the 4 S's proved productive when transitioning from military service to higher education. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) argued, "counselors could better understand individuals' transitions by first assessing their assets and liabilities by the 4 S's, and then developing more efficient plans to assist them" (as cited in Rumann, 2010a, p. 29).

Figure 2.2 - Schlossberg's 4 S's Model



Schlossberg's 4 S's factors provide insight into the mindset of transitioning individual(s). The first S, *Strategies*, was defined by Ryan et al. (2011), as strategies for "the development and utilization of support networks" (p. 56); and further detailed this definition as "the ability to effectively respond to challenges, including academic ones" (p. 56). Furthermore, a successful transition was linked to the nature of a transition, which resulted in change (Schlossberg, 1984). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who encountered situations inclusive of horrific activities, strategies developed for coping with reminders was vastly different than for traditional students (Brewer, 201; Layne, 2016). According to McCoy (2014), methods used by transitioning individuals represented coping mechanisms. The stress associated with transitioning from military service to college often triggered U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans into reacting to situations like they encountered in combat (Brewer, 2016; Ford & Vignare, 2015). It was vital that institutions understand the necessity for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans to have a college experience on par with their contemporaries (Williams, 2015); thus, strategies were needed to assist in welcoming and supporting U.S. Iraq

and Afghanistan military veterans (Livingston et al., 2011).

The next factor in Schlossberg's 4 S's was identified as *Self*. Ryan et al. (2011) noted that the focus on the *Self* in the 4 S's model was "directly related to military veterans' experience transitioning from military service to higher education" (p. 57), thus highlighting an individual's self-acknowledgement of their transitional involvement and an individual's transitional adaptation (Goodman et al., 2006). Furthermore, the *Self*-aspect of this model also included understanding the individual in this process (i.e., personal and life issues). McCoy (2014) elaborated, "*Self* is the individual's personal and demographic characteristics including but not limited to age, gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status" (p. 158), which further supported Schlossberg's theory. According to Schlossberg, the *Self* of the 4 S related to the individual's life and the particular strengths and weaknesses they brought to the situation (Schlossberg, 1984). As U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition, self-awareness of limitations and contributions positively impacted transitional success (Green & Van Dusen, 2012).

The next factor of the 4 S model involved the *Support* available to the individual in transition. Anderson et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of support in the transition process and noted it takes copious amounts of collaboration from the institution the military veteran was departing. Specifically, when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans decide to transition from military service to higher education, military installations made accommodations through "partnering with colleges and universities on base which offered comprehensive student services including credit evaluation, enrollment and registration, and payment of tuition and fees" (Evans, Pellegrino, & Hoggan, 2015, p. 52). From the higher education transition perspective, support meant being able to provide assistance to the military veteran as they prepared to arrive on their

campus. According to Cole (2013), this meant “providing advising to military veterans that understood that military veterans were entering a new environment with a different set of roles and responsibilities ...and also that they were no longer soldiers on the battlefield” (p. 4). In keeping with Ryan et al. (2011), providing success to a transition means conveying to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans that “they already successfully made a similar life transition when they joined the military,” (p. 58) thus providing supporting resources for their transition to civilian life (higher education) assisted the military veteran in generating resiliency in their relationships (i.e., classroom, family & friends) (Walck, 2008).

The last of Schlossberg’s 4 S factors was *Situation*. *Situation*, involves situations individuals were transitioning from as well as the situation they entered. For some U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, departing the military was difficult and overwhelming (Brown, & Gross, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009). In one aspect, the military was very structured and departing meant less structure (Granger, 2016; Layne, 2016; Wolfe, 2012). Another aspect was the civilian community had more chaos through a lack of structure (Granger, 2016; Wolfe, 2012). Transitioning “from an organized military base to a college campus, where individuality was praised and abundant unstructured time was often difficult” (Cunningham, 2012, p. 16). When service members become veterans, they underwent a transitional process, which required transitional steps culminating with their discharge. Within this process, service members were provided with information about transitioning into higher education; however, when transitioning to higher education, there was a lack of specificity to what they encountered on college campuses (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

When transitioning from military service to higher education, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans dealt with their transition by way of facing the demands of their situation

(Ryan, et al., 2011), which underscored the impact on U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans (Williams, 2015). Once U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition to higher education, institutions regarded them as non-traditional students (Anderson et al., 2014; Brewer, 2016; Morreale; 2011). O'Herrin (2011) defined the military veteran student population as “nontraditional students that were typically older and brought credits earned through college courses completed in the military, or American Council on Education credit recommendations” (p. 2). Further, when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans choose to attend college, institutions should be ‘veteran oriented’ and able to provide the necessary services (Vance & Miller, 2009, p. 19).

The application of Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory was relevant when examining how U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition from the military to higher education. When departing the military and encountering the challenges of higher education, Granger (2016) indicated that U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans often encountered “lacking support systems in colleges and universities around the United States” (p. 47). While serving in the armed forces, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were provided with “substantial support structures” (Vachhi, 2012, p. 17) and if institutions were not properly equipped for assisting U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans during this significant transition, “frustrating circumstances often occurred ... and it was hard for military veterans to provide institutions the same level of trust” (Vachhi, 2012, p. 18.).

According to Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg (2012), when adults go through life or career changing transitions, assistance was necessary to facilitate the transition process through coping and adaption skills. Further, for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, the “perception of the transition varied and some considered the transition a crisis situation”

(Anderson et al., 2012, p. 43). Therefore, through Schlossberg's Adult Transition theory, a researchable linkage was established for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, as "each kind of individual transition that had its own particular pattern with respect to adaptation" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7). Although "the theory was originally applied to adult transitions, student development theorists adopted the theory to provide an understanding for college students' transition challenges" (Bonanni, 2015, p. 19). Thus, when analyzing transitions, particularly those of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans to higher education, "it was helpful to understand the transition process, which took place over time and included phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as a person moves into and through the changes occurring in their lives" (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 41). This theory spotlighted the parameters associated with the intricacies of a major life transition (Rumann, 2010b) and what U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experienced when they transitioned from military service to higher education. Moreover, the inclusion of the 4 S's (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) provided additional support of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory through ways to cope with the transition.

In higher education, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans "were unique and disciplined members of the student body with needs that differed from traditional students" (McGovern, 2012, p. 21). Therefore, institutions of higher education were prepared to assist U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Providing assistance to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans was important as it supported the transitional process. While U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition to higher education, common needs involved academic resources and educational services counseling (Chaleunphonh, 2015; Nguyen, 2011). As U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military

veterans transition, “identifying their eligibility for various resources and programs and managing the unique factors that contributed to their difficult transitions was important to their success” (Gaiter, 2015, p.1).

### **U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan Military Veterans & Higher Education**

Whenever there was American involvement in warfare, there were soldiers returning from warfare. Once these military veterans left the military, they often needed something to fill the void of being in military service (Glantz, 2009; Ortiz, 2012). When there was not a battlefield, these warriors needed to become involved in other activities when they transitioned from the military to civilian life (Ortiz, 2012). For nearly 2.6 million U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, transitioning from military service to higher education provided an opportunity to improve their chances of employment in their choice occupation or to enhance their military skills to defend the nation (Madaus, Miller & Vance, 2009; Montgomery, Kehrer & McGrevey, 2011). Transitional assistance for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans entering higher education was of great importance (Livingston et al., 2011; Williams, 2015); conversely, it was different for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans to acclimate to the higher education climate than it was for civilians (Livingston et al., 2011).

U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, transitioning to higher education, were challenged by recalling military- or combat-related events (Church, 2009). For some U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who were prepared to transition to higher education, some transitional assistance was still needed to support their endeavors (Cate, 2011; Layne, 2016; Wyatt, 2011). Therefore, higher education institutions ensured they were prepared to provide transitional assistance to the approximate 2.6 million U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans from the OIF/OEF era (Sportsman, & Thomas, 2015). Hence, in order to provide support for this



student demographic, “it is necessary for higher education to continue to study this emerging special populations more closely” (Chaleunphonh, 2015, p. 2); and also to support mechanisms on campus to aide in the military veteran experience (Ryan et al., 2011). Through institutions providing support in and outside of the classroom, military students were provided with the opportunity to complete their studies successfully (Church, 2009; Vance & Miller, 2009). For many U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, education and civilian growth was the next mission; Schaefer, 2014; hence, as U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition to the civilian sector to obtain their education, “they needed to learn how to navigate institutional structures” (Naphan & Elliott, 2015, p.41) to obtain success.

### **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans**

For the newest generation of war veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, earning a college degree was more achievable than previous generations (Greenberg, 2008; Ortiz, 2012). Past military veterans had limited options to higher education; however, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were able to attend college through online or traditional methods (Cook & Kim, 2009; Ortiz, 2012). According to Cook and Kim (2009), “the three most common alternative delivery formats, regardless of the size of the military population, were online education, evening/night courses, and weekend courses” (p. 13).

Improved technology provided institutions with an opportunity to address the needs of the military veteran population through the development of alternative methods of course delivery, including online and hybrid courses (Cass & Hammond, 2015; Ford & Vignare, 2015). It should be noted; however, that military veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan dealt with entering higher education much differently than other military veterans because of transformed warfare in the form of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and Counter Insurgency Operations (COIN),

which were not a part of previous military strategies. According to Green and Hayden (2013), an estimated 244, 217 service members returned from OIF and OEF operations with TBIs, thus adding to military veteran learning difficulties. Moreover, approximately 2.6 million U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans had served multiple tours (tour meaning a period of one year) (Cook & Kim, 2012; Layne, 2016) and were exposed to IEDs and COIN operations constantly. “The life-changing combat experiences (i.e., witnessing death, losing a limb, etc.) during OIF and OEF continue to have profound effects while attending higher education” (Graf, Ysasi, & Marini, 2015, p. 18). According to Granger (2016), an increase to the “approximate 2.6 million” (p. 9) U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans pursuing a college education was projected to occur, bringing different expectations and needs (Cass & Hammond, 2015). Although U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans had undergone significant difficulties in college settings, progress was constantly being made to accommodate their changing needs (Evans et al., 2015, Vacchi, 2012).

### **Military Veteran Transitions**

While serving their nation, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans often undertook arduous and stressing conditions (Osborne, 2013; Sander, 2012); therefore, transitioning to higher education was something different to which they were accustomed. Further, with the influx of veterans departing the military in the Iraq and Afghanistan war era, public sentiment was positive and institutions were glad to welcome military veterans considering higher education as a viable option for their post military career positive (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Semer & Harmening, 2015); however, facing the challenges associated with transitioning often ranged from role incongruities, maturity and identity issues, which manifest in the lives of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans (Green & Van Dusen, 2012).

Upon departing military service and entering higher education, it was important that military veterans received transition assistance from “university officials to help ease the transition ... also to assist the myriad of issues military veterans face” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 29 (i.e., medical, financial, & academic). According to Callahan and Jarrat (2014), most transitioning students “faced challenges related to geographic mobility and other disruptions of their academic pursuits” (p. 39). Some of these challenges faced by U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans included dealing with combat ailments such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, substance abuse, and hearing- and vision-related injuries (Church, 2009). For other U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, the challenges included stressors that defined their transition from military service and shape their adjustment into higher education (Miller, 2009; Tinoco, 2014). Such stressors included financial and family matters (Church, 2009; Osborne, 2013), as well as “simultaneously negotiating multiple identities such as veteran, student, citizen or peer” (Hammond, 2016, p.148). As U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans adjusted to this newfound educational environment or college, remnants of their old world often reappeared as they departed “a world in which authority was absolute, and the responsibility for actions resided in the hands of their superiors and trust was based on life and death” (Zinger & Cohen, 2010, p. 39). Conversely, when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition from military service, they were not taking orders from military staff, they were responsible for their own actions. Hence, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were not alone when transitioning to higher education as many institutions provided transitional support (Hammond, 2016; Wheeler, 2012). According to Ford, Northrup and Wiley (2009), higher education institutions developed and implemented transitional support initiatives to assist military veterans in “successfully making the transition to

higher education” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 31). Furthermore, without transitional assistance, many U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans returned with ailments and permanent injuries encountered difficulties, “so it was unclear how they managed the transition without assistance” (Wheeler, 2012, p. 777). With a constant flow of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education (Zinger, & Cohen, 2010), continuing to be prepared to receive this student population was beneficial for the military and higher education.

### **Disability Accommodations in Higher Education**

Intertwined with the process of transitioning from military service to higher education, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans often encountered other obstacles (Tinoco, 2014-2015). These obstacles included difficulty “relearning critical thinking skills and expectations of academic work” (Durdella & Kim, 2012, p. 112). Furthermore, the difficulties U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans endure were often attributed to their military service, whether it was combat or non-combat related (Parks & Walker, 2014). Nonetheless, whether U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans had combat or non-combat related injuries or illnesses, institutions of higher education ensured they were prepared to meet their needs (Tinoco, 2014-2015; Vacchi, 2012). Being prepared to assist military veterans on campus meant understanding their associated issues and making accommodations for them.

According to Ostovary and Dapprich (2011), “daily stressors associated with transitioning into civilian life involved lingering effects of combat experiences that interfered with the [military] veterans’ abilities” (p. 65). Therefore, when U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition to higher education, those “veterans with disabilities benefited from accommodation and assistance, but without disclosure, they were not able to access or were

ineligible for services allowable under law” (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011, p. 65); thus, higher education institutions ensured they were prepared to make reasonable accommodations for them under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Through the ADA, military veterans who have unique aspects to their educational challenges qualify for ADA accommodations from their institutions (Bichrest, 2013).

Further, disability disclosure allows military veterans and higher education staff to progress in understanding each other’s needs (NSSE, 2010; Parks & Walker, 2014). According to The National Survey of Student Engagement (2010), “approximately one in five military veterans reported at least one disability, compared to about one in 10 non-veterans” (p. 17). With the aforementioned being relevant to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, “institutions have developed comprehensive campus plans for addressing and coordinating these disability needs” (Cook & Kim, 2009, p. 9). Upon military veterans disclosing their disabilities and needs, higher education administrators ensured they had full understanding of the most prevalent injuries experienced by military veterans (Church, 2009; Williams, 2015). According to Durdella & Kim (2012), for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who served in combat, “the signature injuries are PTSD and TBI and for those who did not served in combat, other mental and physical health conditions was chronic fatigue syndrome” (p. 111). Also, with the “rates of PTSD among OEF/OIF veterans being nearly as high as 31%” (Ramchand et al., 2010, p. 63) and with “TBI present in at least 19% of OIF/OEF veterans” (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011, p. 281), there is a necessity for higher education institutions to be prepared to assist military veterans with these conditions to ensure their success (Williams, 2015).

When dealing with the student population of Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans (or any military veteran), the overall mission of higher education was the same as for

other student populations and that commitment was to retain them until program completion.

When an increased focus was placed upon the needs of Iraq and Afghanistan War era veterans, it increased an institution's opportunity to improve retention (Layne, 2016). As traditional students enter higher education institutions, they were integrated into the academic environment, through technology, socialization and curriculum (Cass & Hammond, 2015). When Iraq and Afghanistan War era veterans were incorporated similarly to traditional students, but with the caveats focusing on their specific needs, then retention rates increased and all parties (military veterans and institutions) were successful (Cass & Hammond, 2015).

### **Chapter Summary**

The utilization of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory with the 4 S's provided insight into the transition of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans (Evans et al, 2015) from military service to higher education. U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning to higher education can prepare themselves for all aspects of college by becoming knowledgeable about an institution's services (Martin & Kilgo, 2015), thus making the transition process less obtrusive (Church, 2009; Evans et al, 2015; Layne, 2016). U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were better served when the transition experience was positive opposed to negative (Heineman, 2016; Vacchi, 2012). When the transition from military service to higher education was experienced at the best possible level, U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were better prepared for academic success (Carne, 2011; Klein, 2013).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The focus of this qualitative research study was to understand the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Specifically, the study sought to understand what adaptation challenges U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans encounter when making the transition from military service to higher education. This chapter explains the research design, discusses the sources of data, described the instruments for gathering data, demonstrated the method for collecting data, illustrates the pilot testing process, and describes the method of data analysis utilized. Criteria for identifying and selecting participants are discussed.

#### **Research Design**

This research study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Phenomenology's research method recognizes "the fundamental nature of an intrinsically intense relationship between the subject researched and those who experienced the phenomenon" (Wertz, 2005, p. 170). When exploring the essence of a phenomenon, relying on an experience or individual perspective was most appropriate to capture its defining characteristics (Merriam, 2009; Rumann, 2010a). The study identified themes from the lived experiences of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Their experiences provided material that informed the development of themes about the transition of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, while applying Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory. Further, looking through Schlossberg's theoretical lens, the researcher examines Schlossberg's 4 S model by assessing

“the transitional phases within the life of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans and the impact of those transitions” (Anderson et al., 2012) (as cited in Layne, 2016, p. 12).

Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory articulated key issues associated with adults making transitions. Schlossberg’s theory underlined the application of the 4 S’s (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) as essential elements of adult transition (Goodman et al., 2006). For U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans, transitioning from military service to higher education was significant and supported phase one of an educational transition: moving into college (Goodman et al., 2006).

### **Researcher’s Roles**

In this phenomenological qualitative research study, the researcher served as the principal data collector. The researcher conducted interviews to ascertain participant experiences. The utilization of in-depth interviews paired with the researcher’s interpersonal skills established a robust data gathering foundation (Creswell, 2015). The researcher’s first-hand experience in the military and as a college student increased rapport among research participants; however, the researcher was careful to recognize potential bias in the research and did not rely on assumptions of being in the same situation as the participants. By relying strictly on the information provided by participants during the interviews and survey, the researcher reduced bias creation.

### **Research Sites and Selection of Participants**

The participants for this study were members of Fairways for Warriors. Fairways for Warriors is a 501c (3) not-for-profit organization located in Kissimmee, Florida who “provides hope, healing, and camaraderie for combat wounded veterans and their families” (<http://fairwaysforwarriors.org>, 2017, p. 1). This organization has 250 members, with three chapters in three states. Further, the researcher sought approval from the President/CEO of



Fairways for Warriors, to conduct the research, of which the researcher is a member and pursued individuals who transitioned from military service to higher education within the last five years prior to this study. The researcher required approval for this action through the University of New England Institutional Review Board. During the selection process, the researcher ensured participant confidentiality by assigning each participant a random, two-digit number. The questions selected for the participant's interview instrument were based on parameters developed by the researcher to support the research phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

For any research study, the process of collecting data for the study “is about asking, watching, and reviewing” (Merriam, 2009, p. 85); it also included important aspects such as “gaining permissions, collecting data and considering ethical issues” (Creswell, 2013, p. 145). With a qualitative research design, the researcher “gained insight into people’s feelings and thoughts, which provided the basis for a future stand-alone qualitative study” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226). The selection of appropriate data collection methods was essential when conducting a phenomenological study (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2016), as these methods need to facilitate interpreting the essence of the lived experience regarding transitioning from military service to higher education (Rumann, 2010b). Regardless of a research methodology, one certainty was copious amounts of data generated and each researcher employed a variety of “ways of making a record of what was said and done” (Merriam, 2002, p. 227) during data collection.

This study utilized a survey instrument and semi-structured interviews to gather participant demographic characteristics as well as information to gather participant reflections on their transitional experiences. Participants who met the criteria for participation were invited to

complete a survey and participate in semi-structured interviews. Through the surveys and interviews, the researcher gathered descriptive data (Seidman, 2006; Rumann, 2010a). Upon gathering research data, the researcher hired a transcription service to transcribe the interview data.

**Survey.** The survey instrument (Appendix B) designed for this study pertained to the collection of demographic and qualifying information from U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education. Further, the survey instrument was created specifically to collect quantitative data that related to how U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experienced transitioning from military service to higher education. The researcher utilized the online SurveyMonkey software to collect, manage, and store research data for descriptive analysis. Students who responded to the invitation to participate were sent an Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) along with the link to the online survey. Completion of the survey's invitation served as an indication of informed consent and the signed consent form was collected from participants prior to the interviews. The researcher sent invitations to potential participants after receiving approval to conduct the research. The survey remained active for a period of two weeks (14 days). The researcher performed an assessment of all participant surveys one week from the initial survey distribution notification and sent a follow-up reminder of the survey to potential participants.

In order to assess the reliability of the survey instrument, the researcher conducted a reliability assessment. According to Sullivan (2011), testing the reliability of survey instrument should be performed prior to administration. Five military veterans with insight on transitioning from military service to higher education reviewed the survey instrument. Reviewers were members of Fairways for Warriors, who transitioned from military service to higher education

more than five years from the date of this study. The first reviewer was a Gulf War Veteran and Veterans Administration (VA) employee. The second was an Iraq War veteran and employee of Fairways for Warriors. The third reviewer was a Gulf War veteran and State of Florida employee. The fourth reviewer was a veteran of the United States Marine Corps and a finance professional. The final reviewer was a veteran of the United States Marine Corps and a golf academy professional. The feedback provided by these reviewers contributed to the validity of the survey instrument.

### **Pilot Testing**

Prior to the administration of the survey instrument to the intended study population, a pilot study was performed. The survey instrument was distributed to 15 military veterans enrolled in higher education institutions throughout the United States. Simon (2011) articulated that “although a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study...a pilot study can be used as a trial run for the main study” (p. 1). The results of the pilot study provided understanding regarding whether changes to the survey instrument were necessary.

**Interviews.** Phenomenology is concerned with experiences and how they transformed individuals; thus, qualitative phenomenological research was concerned with how individuals live these experiences (Tisdell & Merriam, 2015). Although many different approaches were utilized to obtain the essence of the phenomenon researched, "interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). The survey asked participants to provide contact information if they were willing to participate in the follow-up interview. The researcher identified those respondents, verified they meet the criteria for participation, and established appointments for the semi-structured interviews. With a sample pool of 250 members of the

Fairways for Warriors, the researcher randomly selected 10 to 15 veterans from among the survey respondents to participate in the follow-up interviews.

Through semi-structured interviews (Appendix D), additional data was gathered about the lived experiences of the participants transitioning from military service to higher education. The researcher obtained permission from participants to audio record all interviews and produced verbatim transcripts. According to Seidman (2006) and Edwards and Holland (2013), transcription was an essential tool commonly used by qualitative phenomenological researchers to ensure the accuracy of participant input.

The interviews conducted by the researcher were semi-structured and were aligned with the recommendations of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) who wrote that semi-structured interviews were the most useful in gathering information. Furthermore, with the research focused on obtaining information regarding the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education, the researcher intended to provide the most flexibility with interviewing the participants, while employing open-ended questions (Merriam, 2009; Qu & Dumay, 2011). The researcher used research interview questions to encourage more detailed responses regarding the participant's experience; in this case, the lived experience of transitioning from military service to higher education (Berg, 2001). According to Yin (2011), a less formal interview structure allowed for more prevalent themes to be identified among research participants.

Additionally, the researcher's own veteran status helped to establish reliability and trust which was an essential element of phenomenological research (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012; Seidman, 2006). Upon completing participant interviews, the researcher employed member checking and provided each participant with a transcript of the interview to allow the participants

to clarify or revise their comments. These interviews were conducted at the Training Learning Center (TLC) of Fairways for Warriors, as this was a place established by the President/CEO of the organization. During each interview, the President/CEO was on-site to assist each interviewee, should they have any additional questions; however, the interview was conducted solely between the researcher and the participant.

**Participants' Rights.** To ensure each participant understood his or her rights as a participant in this study, copies of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) and the interview questions were sent to study participants when they indicated an interest in participating in the study. The Informed Consent Form addressed the voluntary nature of the study, procedures that were followed, confidentiality, and any associated risks or benefits to participants and provided contact information for the researchers, faculty advisor, and Chair of the University of New England Institutional Review Board. The protocol for this research was approved by the University of New England Institutional Review Board.

### **Data Analysis**

The data for this study came from participant surveys and interviews. The data analysis for this research study was consistent with the analysis procedures detailed in Creswell (2013), who stated data analysis should consist of “preparing and organizing data (i.e., text data as in transcripts) for analysis and then decoding the data into themes through coding, code condensing and represent[ing] data into figures or tables” (p. 180). As outlined by Merriam (2009), the researcher “made notations of each interview, kept track of his thoughts through recording the interview for any speculations that arose and created an inventory of his entire data set” (p. 173-174). By applying Moustakas’ (1994) data analysis tools, the researcher constructed a list of

structural qualities of the consolidated data set. The researcher systematically analyzed the data to identify themes, meanings, and descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher chose to use Likert-scaled questions in alignment with Grace-Martin (2008) who recommended the Likert-scale to support data analysis. Data from the research survey was analyzed through five steps as articulated by Creswell (2013), who indicated that in phenomenological research, (1) “the researcher finds statements (in the interviews or other data sources) about how individuals were experiencing the topic” (p. 193); (2) “take significant statements and then groups them into meaning units or themes” (p. 193); and (3) the researcher details “what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon” (p. 193); (4) next the “researcher writes a description of how the experience happened, called a structural description” (p. 194); and (5) lastly, the researcher “writes a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textual and structural descriptions” (p. 194).

After all interview data was transcribed, the researcher consolidated the data to extract common patterns, themes, and similarities (Thorne, 2000; Turner, 2010) utilizing NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Furthermore, the researcher examined the data for layering and interrelating themes. In data analysis, “layering themes builds on minor and major themes, but organizes them into layers” (Creswell, 2015, p. 250), and identifies interrelating themes to signify “a chronology or sequence of events” (Creswell, 2015, p. 251) among research participants. The researcher analyzed the research data to the point where no additional themes were identified (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

### **Trustworthiness**

In any qualitative research study, integrity is essential; thus the researcher incorporated four critical elements as articulated by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012): credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability to establish integrity. The researcher selected one of six strategies specified by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) regarding credibility: member checking. Having the participants review and confirm the information provided in their interviews with their feedback describes the process of member checking (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The process of member checking “clarified findings” (Rumann, 2010a) and solidified the credibility of the research into the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe (2012). After each interview, participants were provided with a transcript for their verification.

**Credibility.** The application of member checking provided research credibility. By interacting with research participants through an interview, the researcher intended to establish a trust that increased with each engagement. With the researcher being the primary tool for gathering data, credibility was vital because it “suggests whether the findings were accurate and credible from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader” (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, p. 125). Further, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) emphasized that persistent engagement enhanced the quality of the research in which the researcher was able to discuss the essence of the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. By utilizing a survey and an interview (Seidman, 2006; Rumann, 2010a), the researcher spent time with a sample of participants to thoroughly gather data and obtain credibility with the participants. Furthermore, the researcher established an audit trail to assist in data validation and research inquiries (Bowen, 2005; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). This audit trail consisted of the survey instrument and data, interview notes, personal notes, raw data, ideas, recordings, and theme development documentation.

**Transferability.** Within the context of qualitative research, transferability was similar to external research validation (Rumann, 2010a). Moreover, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) specified, that transferability "was about how well the study made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes worked in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site" (p. 113). To strengthen the transferability of the data, the researcher employed in-depth narratives of the data and findings (Merriam, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

**Dependability and Confirmability.** The dependability of qualitative research made a profound statement when the data was analyzed. According to Bitsch (2005) and Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), research dependability dealt with findings, interpretations, and recommendations as presented by received data. The researcher employed an audit trail to enhance research dependability (Bitsch, 2005). One of the best measures to establish confirmability was the audit trail (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012) and in keeping with Tobin and Begley (2004), confirmability was "concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings were not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but derived from the data" (p. 392). Confirmability dealt with inquiry results, which were confirmed by prior research by others (Baxter & Eyles, 1997) and this researcher's confirmability strategy, the audit trail, was previously discussed.

### **Limitations**

The researcher conducted consistent interaction with participants through an online survey, an interview, member checking, and follow-up (if necessary). One research limitation the researcher encountered was obtaining research participants. The researcher collaborated with the President/CEO of Fairways for Warriors to solicit participation from the organization's



membership. Opening the study to the general membership resulted in some respondents to the initial survey not qualifying for the study based on the specific selection criteria established by the researcher. The researcher addressed this limitation through the demographic and qualifying information contained on the survey instrument. Specifically, only participants who responded they were Iraq and Afghanistan war era military veterans and had transitioned from the military to higher education in the past 5 years were selected to participate. Research findings, therefore, were limited to U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans. Another potential limitation were biases of the researcher. The researcher's experience transitioning from military service to higher education increased rapport among research participants, but also introduced researcher biases. To reduce bias, the researcher did not include any personal experiences. With the findings of this research directed to examining the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education in the last five years, not all U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans were characterized by this research.

### **Pilot Study**

Prior to the administration of the survey instrument to the intended study population, a pilot study was performed. The survey instrument was distributed to 15 military veterans enrolled in higher education institutions throughout the United States. Simon (2011) articulated that “although a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study...a pilot study can be used as a trial run for the main study” (p. 1). The results of the pilot study provided understanding regarding whether changes to the survey instrument were necessary. The formal study differed from the pilot study because the researcher focused on students who transitioned from military service within the last five years and the pilot study did not have that caveat.

Consequently, the participants in the pilot study were U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan War era veterans who transitioned from military service more than five year ago. Through the pilot study, the researcher learned more about the qualitative research process. Furthermore, the researcher identified the areas in the survey design that needed improvement, and made those improvements and applied them to this study.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education. The primary research question was: What was the lived experience of a select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education? The researcher sought to answer the following sub-questions:

- What were U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans' perceptions of the transitional experience into higher education?
- How did U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in the selected sample describe the influence of their military experiences upon their transition from military service to higher education?
- How did the select sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in the study describe experiences that connects to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory?

Surveys and interviews served as the primary data gathering tools to address the research questions. The application of social constructivism to Schlossberg's Adult Transition theory and its four types of transitions: (a) *anticipated*, (b) *unanticipated*, (c) *chronic hassles*, and (d) *nonevent* and then to Schlossberg's 4S model (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) provided the theoretical framework for examining the study participants' experiences depending on the circumstances each encountered.

This chapter presents participant profiles and the findings from the data analysis. It begins with demographic information of the survey participants followed by a description of the

ten interview participants, and then presents a description of the emerging themes with supporting evidence.

### **Data Collection and Storage**

For participant recruitment, the researcher sought and received approval from the President/CEO of Fairways for Warriors, a not-for-profit organization located in Kissimmee, Florida. A participant request email was sent to all members of the organization. Two emails were sent a week apart (initial and follow-up/reminder). Each study participant had the opportunity to take the online survey (SurveyMonkey.com) and provided informed consent through the survey. At the end of the online survey (page five), participants were offered an opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview by providing their phone number and email address. When the researcher began to review and analyze survey data, information for the follow-up interview participants was collected. Ten survey participants volunteered for the follow-up interview.

Each of the follow-up interview participants was interviewed for 60 minutes. The researcher contacted each volunteer (by email and telephone) and coordinated the day and time for each interview. During interview coordination, the researcher explained the consent form to each interview participant. Once all of the interviews were scheduled, the researcher conducted interviews. Prior to commencement of the interviews, the researcher went over the informed consent form to ensure each interview participant understood. After covering the informed consent form, the researcher reiterated to each interview participant that he or she could discontinue the interview at any time for any reason. The interview consisted of 16 scripted questions. Each question related to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory and Schlossberg 4 S

Model. All of the interviews were recorded by a digital recording device and transcribed by Rev.com transcription service.

All demographic data collected online by SurveyMonkey.com was aggregated and analyzed online by SurveyMonkey.com. The demographic data provided by the SurveyMonkey.com analysis provided the researcher with demographic trends among all researcher participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher organized this data and used NVivo software for a statistical analysis. Once imported into NVivo software, the researcher aggregated the demographic data into groupings predicated by the online survey demographic section. A Pre-Code list was established from the survey data and an emergent code list was established to identify trends and relationships from the survey data. After establishing the coding list for the survey data, the researcher developed emergent codes for the trends and relationships in the survey data (e.g., number of participants attending public 4-year institutions, etc.). Coding of the survey data was utilized to organize data and to answer the following questions: What trends are revealed? What does the data represent? What was prevalent? What occurred? Throughout the survey data coding process, the researcher produced coding notes in an effort to refine the coding scheme for comparison to the interview data. From data analysis and coding, survey demographic data trends were generated. From this process, survey demographic information was produced.

### **Survey Demographics**

The online research survey conducted through SurveyMonkey.com provided demographic data. The online survey was sent to 250 members of Fairways for Warriors. Out of the 250 members, 38 members participated in the survey, yielding a 15% response rate. Survey

participants consisted of 38 Iraq & Afghanistan War era military veterans with an age range 25 to 64 years. Tables 4.1-4.9 present additional demographic data collected from the online survey.

Table 4.1 presents an overview of participant ethnicity. All 38 participants self-identified their ethnicity:

Table 4.1

<i>Participant Demographics: Ethnicity</i>	
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>#</b>
African American	14
Asian/Pacific Islander	3
Caucasian	10
Hispanic/Latino	6
Biracial	5

Participants were asked to identify the type of academic program and their enrollment status, whether full- or part-time. Twenty-one participants reported they were not currently enrolled as a student. Table 4.2 shows the type of program and enrollment status (full or part-time) for the remaining 17 students.

Table 4.2

*Participant Demographics: Type of Program and Enrollment Status*

<b>Status</b>	<b>Full-Time</b>	<b>Part-Time</b>
4-Year Undergraduate	4	2
2-Year Undergraduate	3	2
Graduate	5	1

Participants who were currently enrolled in college were asked to identify their current grade level. Table 4.3 records the student status (grade level). Eight participants did not provide a response regarding this survey question for unknown reasons.

Table 4.3

<i>Participant Demographics: Post-Secondary Grade Level</i>							
<b>Grade</b>	<b>Freshman</b>	<b>Sophomore</b>	<b>Junior</b>	<b>Senior</b>	<b>Graduate</b>	<b>Professional</b>	<b>Intern</b>
	2	3	5	3	13	3	1

Participants were asked whether they were enrolled in on-campus, online, or hybrid courses. Table 4.4 provides the different ways the participants received their education.

Table 4.4

<i>Participant Demographics: Method of Delivery</i>	
<b>Method of Delivery</b>	<b>#</b>
On-Campus Classes (more than 50% of classes)	10
Online Classes (more than 50% of classes)	19
Hybrid Classes (On-Campus & Online)	9

Participants were asked about their affiliation and military branch of service. Table 4.5 provides the breakdown of participant military affiliation, which was the capacity they served in the military, and Table 4.6 provides the participant's military branch of service.

Table 4.5

<i>Participant Demographics: Military Affiliation</i>	
<b>Military Affiliation</b>	<b>#</b>
Active Duty	15
Reserves	3
National Guard	3
Veteran	17

Table 4.6

<i>Participant Demographics: Military Branch</i>	
<b>Military Branch</b>	<b>#</b>
Army	27
Marine Corps	5

Navy	4
Air Force	2

Table 4.7 indicates whether participants were discharged from military service with Honorable, General, or Medical discharges.

Those participants who received a medical discharge underwent a Medical Review Board (MRB) that was administered by their branch of service based on the participant's failure to meet military medical standards.

Table 4.7

*Participant Demographics: Military Discharge*

Honorable	27
General	7
Medical	4

The survey asked participants to report whether they suffered from any chronic injuries related to military service and whether there was any impact from those injuries on their transition from the military to higher education. Table 4.8 shows the number of participants with chronic injuries.

Table 4.8

*Participant Demographics: Chronic Injuries and Impact*

Injuries	33
No Injuries	5
Impact	26
No Impact	7

The participants were asked to report whether they had been deployed during a combat era and whether during that deployment they had any direct combat experience. Table 4.9



indicates how many of the participants were deployed into combat zones and the number who did and did not have combat experience while deployed.

Table 4.9

*Participant Demographics: Combat Deployment versus  
Combat Experience*

<b>Deployed/Combat Experience</b>	<b>#</b>
Combat Deployed	35
Not Combat Deployed	3
Combat Experience	22
No Combat Experience	13

Approximately 53% of the survey respondents served more than 15 years in the military, while the remaining 47% had less than 15 years of service. The highest number of participants (71%) was enlisted. and the remaining 29% were officers.

The majority of the participants (97%) lived off campus; 78% were married with at least 1 dependent; and of the participants, 37% did not use any financial aid (including military aid). A Majority of the participants (61%) attended public 4-year institutions and planned their transition from the military to higher education; however, of those with combat experience who planned their transition, 74% reported their memories from combat impacted their transition. Moreover, the majority of the participants (74%) felt they were supported by the military during their transition and 61% felt prepared to transition from military service to higher education.

### **Survey Questions**

As for the data related to the question: *Was your transition from the military planned*, 58% (22) said *Yes*, while 42% (16) said *No*. Tables 4.10- 4.32 present additional survey question data collected from the online survey.

Table 4.10

*Survey Question: Did your memories from military service impact your transition?*

	#	%
Yes	10	26
No	28	74

Table 4.11

*Survey Question: Did your memories help your transition or were they a detraction?*

	#	%
Help	8	27
Detracted	22	73

Table 4.12

*Survey Question: Were there other factors that impacted your military Transition?*

	#	%
Yes	24	63
No	14	37

Table 4.13

*Survey Question: Did these factors help your military transition or were they a detraction?*

	#	%
Help	9	24
Detracted	17	45
Skipped	12	31

Table 4.14

*Survey Question: Do you have any chronic injuries/ illnesses?*

	#	%
Help	9	24
Detracted	17	45
Skipped	12	31

Table 4.15

*Survey Question: Did these chronic injuries/illnesses impact your transition?*

	#	%
Yes	25	66
No	8	21
Skipped	5	13

Table 4.16

*Survey Question: Has your transition from military service to higher education been easy?*

	#	%
Yes	22	58
No	14	37
Skipped	2	5

Table 4.17

*Survey Question: Did you feel you were supported during your transition from military service to higher education by the military, your family, the college or others?*

	#	%
Yes	27	71
No	10	26
Skipped	1	3

Table 4.18

*Survey Question: Were you prepared to transition from military service to higher education?*

	#	%
Yes	24	63
No	14	37
Skipped	0	0

Table 4.19

*Survey Question: When transitioning to higher education, it was important for institutions to have a formal program welcoming military veterans.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	1	3
Disagree	1	3
Neutral	7	18
Agree	9	24
Strongly Agree	17	44
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.20

*Survey Question: During my transition out of the military, I felt it was important for me to get a college education.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	1	3
Disagree	2	5
Neutral	4	11
Agree	7	18
Strongly Agree	21	55
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.21

*Survey Question: Once I had transitioned into higher education, I was glad I completed the process.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Disagree	1	3
Neutral	6	16
Agree	10	26
Strongly Agree	18	47
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.22

*Survey Question: During my transition into higher education, I was offered transition assistance by the school I was preparing to attend.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	6	16
Disagree	6	16
Neutral	10	26
Agree	7	18
Strongly Agree	5	13
Skipped	4	11

Table 4.23

*Survey Question: During my transition, I felt comfortable with the registration process.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	3	8
Disagree	4	11
Neutral	6	16
Agree	15	38
Strongly Agree	6	16
Skipped	4	11

Table 4.24

*Survey Question: I had difficulty applying for my financial aid during my transition period.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	7	18
Disagree	10	26
Neutral	12	32
Agree	3	8
Strongly Agree	3	8
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.25

*Survey Question: I had difficulty socializing during my transition into higher education.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	6	16
Disagree	11	29
Neutral	7	18
Agree	5	13
Strongly Agree	6	16
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.26

*Survey Question: I feel that military personnel respected me during my transition period into higher education.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	3	8
Disagree	7	18
Neutral	14	37
Agree	9	24
Strongly Agree	2	5
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.27

*Survey Question: I feel that civilian personnel respected me during my transition period into higher education.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	3	8
Disagree	2	5
Neutral	11	29
Agree	15	39
Strongly Agree	4	11
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.28

*Survey Question: I feel that higher education personnel respected me as a veteran during my transition period.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	2	5
Disagree	3	8
Neutral	7	18
Agree	18	47
Strongly Agree	5	14
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.29

*Survey Question After I transitioned into higher education, institution personnel treated me fairly.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	2	5
Disagree	3	8
Neutral	5	13
Agree	17	45
Strongly Agree	8	21
Skipped	3	8

Table 4.30

*Survey Question: I am satisfied with my military transition to higher education experience.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	2	5
Disagree	3	8
Neutral	8	21
Agree	12	31
Strongly Agree	9	24
Skipped	4	11

Table 4.31  
*Survey Question: I identify as a veteran.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	1	5
Disagree	2	8
Neutral	1	21
Agree	4	31
Strongly Agree	27	24
Skipped	3	11

Table 4.32  
*Survey Question: I identify as a disabled veteran.*

	#	%
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Disagree	2	5
Neutral	8	21
Agree	6	16
Strongly Agree	19	50
Skipped	3	8

### **Interview Participant Profiles**

To obtain interview participants, the researcher provided a volunteer statement at the end of the online survey instrument. This invitation allowed survey participants to continue their participation in the study through participating in a follow-up interview. After the online survey was complete, the researcher reviewed the survey data and ten participants chose to participate in the follow-up interview. The researcher used 16 scripted open-ended questions to guide the interviews. The questions were situations and circumstances to ascertain what might be experienced when transitioning from military service to higher education. Each interview was



recorded using a digital recorder. All interview recordings were submitted to Rev.com for verbatim transcription. All study interview recordings and transcripts were secured in a file on a password protected and encrypted portable storage device and secured in a locked, fireproof safe. All printed interview materials were stored in a locked file cabinet. Interview participant identifying information was removed from the transcripts to ensure confidentiality.

All transcribed interviews were organized separately from the demographic data and coded using pseudonyms. Also, each interview question was entered into NVivo and assigned a separate code. Transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo software and cases were established for each interview participant. Furthermore, each participant was coded and analyzed using NVivo software for pattern and theme identification. Verbatim transcription allowed for significant words, statements, and phrases to be identified and isolated. When entered into NVivo, interview transcripts were analyzed regarding participants' lived experiences. This analysis yielded an NVivo Word Cloud (Figure 3). The identification of frequently used words by interview participants generated patterns and themes and assisted the researcher in establishing a Pre-Set code list of the interview data.



from his father and step-mother who have taught him “to be the best man, father, and person he can be.”

**Military.** G1 describes his family as a loyal military family that “always has someone from each generation that serves in the military.” He comes from a long line of military that have all served in combat. He highly respects the military and their families and expects all Americans to do the same. He stated, “My family has been involved in every American conflict since Korea, so I felt it was only right that I did my part. This was one of the main things that led me to joining the Army.” G1 joined the United States Army, served in a challenging military occupation, and ended up serving in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. As he departed the military, he had to go through a medical board. Dealing with the things associated with transitioning from the military to higher education made him very stressed.

**College.** When data was collected, G1 was enrolled part-time at a public 4-year college/university. He previously was enrolled in another public 4-year college/university prior to his wife being re-assigned overseas. At the time of the interview, he had been enrolled for two months in the Spring 2017 semester. He chose to transfer his credits from his previous college to his present college, but changed his academic major, so he will have to take more classes, which means that he will be in college longer than he thought. During his initial college courses, he was using tuition assistance and Post 9/11 GI Bill, but now he is a disabled veteran and is enrolled in the Veterans Administration (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation program. He also reported that he was glad that he was able to study something that he always liked but was unable to study because of military service.

**Personal.** At present, G1 intends to complete his education and support his wife in her career. At the time of the interview, he had just returned from playing golf and picking up his

son from school. Since retiring, he is a full-time father, and reported he is very happy. He did not want to talk about the previous tension between him and his wife, but said things are better because of their improved financial situation. He also stated that his wife supported him in his golf endeavors and with his education.

**Transition viewpoint.** The transition for G1 was considered challenging. He had recently moved with his wife to another duty station, so all of the connections he had made were lost when he had to go through another Army transition program. He said:

I felt like the Army had something against me because I had to go through the transition process twice. I tried to tell them that I had completed it at my old duty station and my wife and me had just been transferred to this new base. However, they did not listen to me and made me go through the program again.

G1 also said, “In order for me to receive my benefits from my medical retirement, I had to do what they said.” He felt as if the Army did not want to give him his medical retirement and that everyone was out to get him.

#### **G.I. Jane 2 (G2)**

G2 is a Biracial female who is an Army veteran. She is from a large family and she immigrated to the U.S. along with the rest of her immediate family. She is married to a retired military veteran and has children of her own.

**Military.** G2 regards the military as a “life-long dream.” She has a strong sense of patriotism since she has been a military spouse as well. She was the first in her family to serve in the military, and when she joined, some of her family members were a little skeptical about her joining because of the potential for her to go to combat. She said:

When I was not in the military, I never could understand why Americans did not serve in the military since they claim to love this country so much. In my opinion, the best way to show your country that you love it is to support it, and I can't think of a better way to do that than to serve in the military.

She continues to serve in the reserves and understands the potential for combat duty was a part of service. Because her husband is a veteran, she works with him to manage her career to ensure she was ready to depart the Army when the time comes.

**College.** When data was collected, G2 was enrolled in graduate school full-time at a public 4-year college/university. She has been enrolled in this 3-year program for one year. She intends to complete her program and to move onto a doctorate. She stated that “she was glad that she worked with her family (e.g., spouse and children) regarding her education to ensure they were able to support her financially and emotionally during her education years.”

**Personal.** G2's family relationship is very strong. She talks to her parents and at least one of her siblings daily. She also enjoys interactions with her immediate family, so she described herself as being “happy all around.” Also, she described herself as “a very spiritual person” that firmly believes that time is valuable. She often participates in golf clinics and family bonding activities with Fairways for Warriors as part of her membership and really enjoys the interaction with her fellow veterans.

**Transition viewpoint.** For G2, her anticipated transition was viewed with nervousness, and she thought the Army did a poor job assisting her during the transition. She stated, “I expected the military to have someone in place to assist me with the transition process and also to steer me the right way.” She said, “I struggled with the unstructured protocols of society and how there is not clear instruction like the military provides.” She also stated that when she

wanted to take time to contact the colleges she was interested in attending, her military unit was not cooperative. She decided to just wait until she completed her transition and was back at home before she selected a school and enrolled.

### **G.I. Joe 3 (G3)**

G3 is Asian/Pacific Islander male, who retired from Active Duty as a disabled Army veteran. He is married with children and was enrolled full-time as a senior at a private four-year undergraduate college/university. He is the youngest of three siblings and was from a military family.

**Military.** G3's father and elder brother served in the Army and he followed in their footsteps. He served in an Army occupation that was really stressful and he served in Afghanistan. He stated, "After Afghanistan, there was no way I could continue in the Army after I saw what happened to my buddies." He also stated he was not happy with the way the Army treated him when he retired as he felt they just 'threw him away like a piece of trash' once they medically retired him. He described looking back at the whole process of retiring from the military, and thought that it could been better. He was unsure if things would have changed if he were more involved in the retirement process.

**College.** G3's education started while he was in the Army and continued when he retired. During periods of training and deployment, he was taking online courses, which was difficult; now he was able to devote all of his time to finishing his education. He stated: "it really feels good knowing that the Army will not send me to war again, and I will not have to put my education on hold again." When asked if he plans to go on to getting an advanced degree online, he responded, yes.

**Personal.** G3 wanted to retire to Florida, but it did not work out. Therefore, he ended up retiring near his wife's family. Where he lives made it difficult for him to obtain his healthcare as there are not many VA medical centers nearby despite living near a military installation. G3 stated that if it wasn't for Medicare he would be in bad shape. With the proposed political changes to Medicare, G3 was really nervous because it will cause a lot of stress with his healthcare situation. Other than that, things are great for him and his family because they are very supportive of him getting his education.

**Transition viewpoint.** G3 had served for more than twenty years, but after his deployment he had a lot of injuries that forced him into a medical retirement. He said:

For me, I was a little worried at the beginning of my medical board because I thought they were only going to give me the medical retirement and not the retirement that I earned. So I was really stressed for about three months, but after I went to see the Army lawyer, he told me that I would receive both retirements (regular and medical) since I had over 20 years of service...I was under a lot of pressure from my wife during the time I did not know about both retirements because she was giving me a hard time because we did not know how we would pay all of our bills; but after I found out about both retirements, my stress level went down a lot.

G3 also said that he took advantage of everything the Army provided during the transition program. He wanted to make sure he learned everything he could because he was fearful that something would go wrong, and he wanted to be ready to leave the Army and get a job (if necessary).

#### **G.I. Joe 4 (G4)**

G4 is a Hispanic retired male, disabled Active Duty Army veteran. He is married and has children. He is the eldest of three children and is very close to his family as he interacts with them daily. G4 reported, “I make sure that I am involved with my children’s education because I want to make sure they manage their career early so that they can do what they want to when they graduate.”

**Military.** G4’s service in the military was not uncommon in his culture, but was uncommon in his family; as of yet, he was the only one to have served in the military, and he hopes his children will follow in his footsteps. Due to his service, he acquired an illness that forced him to retire from the military, and he deals with this illness on a daily basis. G4 stated, “I really wanted to stay longer, but I had no choice because my body could not take the punishment.” G4 also went on to vent that he feels that military veterans should be treated better for all that they did for the nation.

**College.** As G4 served in two components in the military (Navy and Army), he acquired a lot of education, but he still wanted to advance his education; thus, the purpose of him obtaining a graduate degree. By seeking this degree, he feels he will be able to help out his wife who had to go back to work full time since he had to retire from active duty. He always planned to get a basic and advanced education, so when he realized that he would be getting out, he and his wife made a plan for him to go to college.

**Personal.** G4 feels that he needs to go back to work since he was medically retired from active duty. Since his retirement, he and his wife had to switch roles, and this did not sit well with him. Because of this change, he has been driven to obtain his education so that he can continue to increase their standard of living. They are living very well, but he wants his wife to



know that he was more than capable of taking care of their family while also supporting her career.

**Transition viewpoint.** The transition for G4 was described as stressful and filled with uncertainty with his Medical Review Board (MRB) process. He said:

My situation was really stressful when I went through my MRB. Primarily because my illness was acquired in combat, and it was described as being very dangerous. There have been individuals who have my illness that have died and unless I followed a strict diet and medical regiment, I would not be around for long...So knowing everything about my MRB results was a distant second for me. Money was not an issue; all I cared about was making sure that I received my benefits so that my wife and my family did not have to work just to take care of me.

He also said, “I was so stressed out during the MRB and transition that I lost 15 pounds and once I found out that I was declared disabled and unfit for the Army, I celebrated.” G4 also reported,

Although my wife had to return to work because I am disabled, it brought on stress once again, but at least we did not have to worry about the medical aspect; and going to school will allow me to work and help my family out some more because I did not want all of the pressure on my wife. This way, it will make my wife relax a lot more and not to worry about making money to support the family.

### **G.I. Joe 5 (G5)**

G5 is a Caucasian male who is a remarried widower disabled Navy veteran with PTSD. He expressed his pleasure in returning to the area in the U.S. where he was raised, when he was retired. He explained, “Despite being a widower, I am glad that I had the support of my former

wife and the support of my current wife. It was really important that my family supports me and that I support them.”

**Military.** G5 served the Navy in a complicated and stressful occupation and was deployed numerous times to combat areas where he had some traumatic experiences. From his combat experiences, he was bothered often by PTSD and has appointments with a psychiatrist frequently. He reported:

I really wish I was able to stay in the Navy, but with my injuries, it was not possible, so I have to move on ... but I did not want to be taken for granted as a veteran, and I will not tolerate being treated bad when I sacrificed for my country.

**College.** G5 undertook some vocational and college courses while serving in the Navy. Upon transitioning out of the Navy, he enrolled in a 2-year vocational technical college. He stated, “The college was trying to treat me like I was out of high school when I was a grown man,” and this made him very angry. Therefore, he left that college because of that experience and other issues associated with that program and enrolled in an educational program associated with sports. He feels much better about his college program and noted that being trained as a golf professional has brought peace and balance to help him with his injuries and mental challenges. He also stated that he waited too long to plan his transition because he did not think he would be getting out so soon, so it was a surprise to him.

**Personal.** During the interview G5 expressed that he had a lot of issues with PTSD and that if it wasn’t for his wife, he would have “lost it after he got back from combat.” He also expressed that he was having difficulty negotiating the VA healthcare system. He was advised to drive to a location farther away from his residence when there was a closer location to his residence, which frustrated him greatly.

**Transition viewpoint.** G5 described his transition as one of disappointment and anger.

He said:

I was not happy at all about going through the MRB process. I mean, at times, my wife had to calm me down about the process and waiting for almost a year just to find out whether or not they were going to kick me out and retire me was extremely stressful. At times, my wife had to call me several times a day to talk to me and calm me down.

G5 further stated:

I did not get along with a lot of people and so I am glad that I decided to attend this school, because this game forces me to focus. It was also very challenging and when I get bothered or upset, I have to text or talk with my wife to help me get through. I am so glad that I have her because if I did not, things would not be good.

#### **G.I. Joe 6 (G6)**

G6 is an African American male who is divorced and retired from active duty in the Army. He has children, and at the time of this interview, he was spending time with his child whose was enrolled full-time in college.

**Military.** After retiring from active duty, G6 told me that he felt it was time for him to move on with the rest of his life. He could have continued his career, but he felt that it was time to “turn the page in his life and move to another career that does not involve the military.”

Through his service as a senior maintenance supervisor, G6 has been directly involved in combat numerous times. He stated, “I did not want the Army to be the last thing I did in my life, so since I made it back alive after 20 years, it was time to punch out while I had all of my body parts.”

**College.** At the time of the data collection, G6 was taking courses part-time (some hybrid and some on campus) and working full-time. He said that when in the Army, he took some college courses, but he was not serious; however, he had always planned on completing his education. He added it was difficult to accomplish while serving in the military. Also, he reported that he was now focused on what he really wanted to do, and he was glad that he thought about his future because so many soldiers did not plan to leave the military. He also said he was glad that he found a good school that had a good program for veterans because it made all the difference for his school choice.

**Personal.** Initially, G6 told me that when he first entered the Army, he was not planning on staying in very long but somewhere that changed. He quickly realized that the Army could provide him a good life, and he made an exit plan so he would not be like some other people who had gotten out and had failed and needed to go back in the Army to survive. The only thing he had to adjust to was the fact that he was in classes with much younger students. He stated:

When I am in class, some fellow students are surprised at my age ... so I just roll with it and understand that I have been in the real world and they have not, and so I focus on getting an education and nothing more.

He also reported that his family was very glad that he was in school because they were worried about what he would do when he got out the military.

**Transition viewpoint.** As for G6, his transition was less stressful than he thought it would be. He did not encounter any family conflicts because being a divorced father with children, he did not have to attend to his children and it was only him he had to worry about. He stated:

When I submitted my retirement, I went through the process that my Army base provided and so I made sure to take advantage of everything. Since I was retiring, the Army transition program, personnel were really helpful to me. As for the school I was going to attend, I did not have a worry at all and as my military unit allowed me to take all the time I needed to ensure my transition to college was a smooth one.... As for the other things that go with retiring I did not have to worry about a wife (because I did not have one) and my children were with my ex-wife, so it was easy for me.

#### **G.I. Joe 7 (G7)**

G7 is a Caucasian married male who is a retired active duty veteran of the Air Force. He has children that are grown and on their own, either in college or working in full-time occupations, thus offering him and his wife a lot of flexibility.

**Military.** During his service in the military, he deployed several times in an occupation that was demanding and dangerous, thus he was directly exposed to combat action. Describing his experiences, he stated that he was ready to depart the military after serving more than 20 years and had a plan to move on without hesitation.

**College.** For G7, obtaining higher education was something that he has planned throughout his military career. He was able to obtain his undergraduate and graduate degrees while in the military. With the choice of getting out of the military or to continue serving, he chose to transition to a graduate fellowship without reservation. All of his education was obtained during his military career.

**Personal.** When participating in the interview, he made sure to convey that during his service he felt it was necessary to take advantage of every educational opportunity the Air Force

provided him and that serving in the military, despite all of its stressors, was only a part of his life.

**Transition viewpoint.** When the researcher asked G7 about his transition, he appeared laidback in his thoughts about the entire process, but wished that it could have been better. He considered his transition to be a little stressful. He stated that he worked with his wife to ensure that they were ready to retire. He stated:

My retirement was not without any issues because I did not have any services provided to me by the Air Force. If it was not for me and my wife doing our homework, we would have been in bad shape.

He also said, “Luckily, we (he and his wife) started working on my retirement transition in advance so when I was not provided a transition briefing from the Air Force, it was no big deal and so we just took this issue in stride.” About transitioning to college, he said he had no trouble, “The school was really good in assisting me and since my unit was deployed and I was back in the U.S., I was able to work with my college and the transition was smooth.

### **G.I. Joe 8 (G8)**

G8 is a Caucasian, single male, active duty veteran. In terms of family, he noted during the interview that his only family member was his brother, and some female acquaintances were the ones who helped him during his transitional period. Primarily, he reported that if it was not for his brother, he would have had a difficult time adjusting to his combat memories.

**Military.** G8 served in the Army in a high stress and difficult occupation and he was directly involved in numerous combat activities and multiple deployments. Through his memories, he stated, “the main reason for his departure from the Army was that upon his return from his last deployment, members of his unit were extended and preparing to re-deploy again

and he was asked to deploy again”; thus, he chose not to re-enlist and to transition to higher education. Although he decided to get out at the last minute, he feels that he made the right decision.

**College.** When asked about his experience transitioning to higher education, he noted that he had not received any assistance and that he had to plan everything. It was not until he arrived at his 4-year public college/university that he received any transitional assistance. He stated, “The Army didn’t help me at all when I transitioned, and I am so glad that my school had a really good student veterans’ office when I arrived on campus, or I would have been lost.”

**Personal.** When asked to elaborate on some of the things related to his personal experiences in the Army, he hesitated in responding. It was obvious he did not feel comfortable in doing so he was advised that if he did not feel comfortable talking about his personal experiences he did not have to. He chose not to and preferred to again talk about how close he is to his brother who helped him deal with his combat memories.

**Transition viewpoint.** G8 felt like his Army occupation was a bad influence on him and that if he did not get out of the military, he would get killed in combat. He described his anticipated transition as filled with pressure. He stated:

Since I wanted to ETS from the Army, a lot of people in my unit were trying to change my mind about getting out and going to college. It really bothered me that some people cared more about the Army and having me kill people, than to support me in my future plans.... The pressure from my unit never stopped. Even after we returned from our deployment, the pressure was constantly applied to get me to stay in the Army and I finally had to let my Sergeant know that I was tired of my job and I wanted to do something other than killing people.

## **G.I. Joe 9 (G9)**

G9 is a married African American male who retired from active duty. He has children and he recounted that his family was the backbone of his support during his transition from military service to higher education. He stated that during his career he and his wife were determined to ensure that they would not serve the military longer than necessary, and he felt that it was time for him to move on with his life.

**Military.** G9 served in a technical occupation in the Army for over 20 years. During his service, he was deployed to a combat zone but was not directly involved in combat action. His wife still serves in the Army, and he continues to serve the nation as an Army spouse.

**College.** He transitioned to a career/technical college where he is obtaining a specialty in a high demand, and is a technical civilian in his junior year. He stated that although he served over 20 years in the Army, he intended to leave the Army so he could complete his education because he was not able to that while he served.

**Personal.** When I interviewed G9, he noted that at the time of transitioning to higher education, he did not have anything that precluded him from making this process a smooth one. Prior to transitioning, he stated, he made a plan and carried it out so that he could obtain his education while also spending more time with his family.

**Transition viewpoint.** When G9 transitioned from the military, he stated that his transition was “easy-going and without any issues.” He stated:

I was different than a lot of soldiers retiring because I have a wife that also serves in the Army. So financially, I was more than good and so I was not stressed about money coming in or where my next paycheck was going to come from.... The only thing that I really had to worry about was finding the right school for me. I had been looking at



number of schools and I had one in particular in mind, but I wanted to make sure I had several options just in case I was not accepted into the program that I wanted. Other than that, things were really easy and simple for me.

G9 also said that he attended some of the transitional briefing classes, but thought some of the information they provided did not pertain to him. When asked what did not pertain to him, he said, “the program information that helped soldiers get resume assistance and how to write a cover letter ... things like that. I had already done that stuff so I was not interested in it.”

#### **G.I. Jane 10 (G10)**

G10 is a single, Biracial female. She served in the Army Reserves, received a medical retirement, and has no children. She lives away from her parents but remains very close and expressed that during her transition it was her parents that provided her the much-needed support. She stated, “during and after my transition, my parents were instrumental in providing me support ...being single, I am sure glad that they are still there to support me.”

**Military.** While serving in the Army Reserves, she was deployed to Iraq and served as an officer and in a high demanding occupation. She followed in the footsteps of her father who also served in the military, but as a Marine during the Vietnam War. She stated, “After I came back from Iraq, it was weird initially; being able to talk about combat experiences with my dad, but at the same time, I was glad that I had someone who understood what I went through.”

**College.** After being medically retired, G10 transitioned to graduate school to pursue an occupation in the medical field. She stated that transitioning was something that she had always planned and that when it was time to end her service, it was relatively easy.

**Personal.** G10 stated that her parents are the main support in her life and that after transitioning from the military, being able to move back home with her parents made her transition back into education and society much easier.

**Transition viewpoint.** G10's transition was stressful at times, but not always. She said:

I really had a good transition and I am so glad that I was at a very good Army hospital during my MRB. I feel that if I was at another Army base, I would not have received such good treatment. I have heard from other soldiers that some people who were injured in combat do not always receive good treatment, despite what was reported in the news.... While at this Army hospital, my unit was so helpful and willing to assist me that I wished that everyone going through a MRB received the treatment that I received. They were so helpful and friendly to my family and me that when I expressed that I wanted to go back to school, they were willing to help me in any way. Also, when my family would come to visit me, they were treated really well and so I can say that my transition from the Army was great. As for school, I did not have any issues because I had already planned ahead so I was ready to leave the army and go to grad school. Since she was injured in Iraq, she told the researcher that there was a level of uncertainty concerning her MRB, but this was only when she was not in the U.S. She felt like she was lucky to have her parents always with her at that Army hospital and that helped with her transition.

### **Summary of Participants**

The participants in the interview portion of the study ranged in age from 27 to 53 years old. The participants were diverse and self-identified as the following: 3 African American; 3 Caucasian, 2 Biracial, 1 Asian Pacific Islander and 1 as Hispanic. Similarly, interview

participant backgrounds were also diverse, with several having a legacy of serving in the military to some being first generation military.

Participants varied in their motivation to transition from the military to higher education. G2, G3, G6, G7, G8, G9 & G10 all stated that it was always their plan to transition from the military to higher education; however, G10 stated that she did not plan to transition when she did; while G1, G4, & G5 all received medical retirements when they intended to stay in the military longer. Participants represented all the branches of the military. Six served in the Active Duty Army, two in the Army Reserves, one in the Navy and one in the Air Force. At the time of conducting the interviews, most of the participants were enrolled in higher education, with one preparing to enroll in classes after taking a semester off. Finally, only one interviewee had not been deployed, with the others who had at least one deployment.

Five participants attended college via online courses, while three attended on campus and two attended through hybrid courses (on-campus & online). With the exception of G5 who was coming off a break in his studies, all of the participants were full-time students. Five of the interviewees were disabled and unable to work, while three were working full-time, one was working part-time, employed but looking for work. Almost all of the interviewees were in the late stages of their degree programs, with one (G5) in the early stages of his degree program and one was in an academic fellowship.

All of the interviewee transitions were either *Anticipated* or *Unanticipated*, with only the disabled interviewees having *Chronic Hassles* and no *Non-event* transitions. However, it appeared that *Anticipated* transitions were the most prominent for the interviewee participants, as they described their experiences transitioning from military service to higher education. The

following section focuses on the process of transitioning from military service to higher education and the 4 themes that emerged from the data analysis.

### **Emergent Themes**

The process of transitioning from military service to higher education for the interview participants was a process that was filled with challenges. Upon completing the interviews, data collection, and analysis, four emergent themes were identified as being significant: planning for transition (*strategy*), awareness of the transition (*self*), support during the transition (*support*), and transitional situation awareness (*situation*). Each theme was detailed with the information provided by the interview participants, relates their experiences as they transitioned from military service to higher education, and correlates to Schlossberg's 4S model. The discussion commences with the first theme, planning for the transition from military service to higher education, then goes into the interview participant's awareness of self in coping with transition from military service to higher education. Next the discussion focuses on types of support during the transition and finishes up with transitional situation awareness. Theme details encompass individual experiences of transitioning from military service to higher education and explain this phenomenon.

#### **Planning for Transition**

Interview participants planned transition from military service to higher education in different ways and from different perspectives; however, they all shared the anxiety and uncertainty that came along with making this major transition. Some interview participants were excited about the fact that they would be departing the military for higher education; however, others did not share the same sentiment as they were not as prepared for their transition from military service. By making a plan for their transition from military service to higher education,

interview participants conveyed one aspect of Schlossberg's 4S model for coping with transition. Through planning for their transition, the *Strategy* portion of Schlossberg's 4S model allowed them to "cope with the situation to alleviate or respond to stressful or challenging situations" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 66).

**Preparing to depart the military.** Four of the ten interview participants were enthusiastic about knowing they would soon be out of the military and in higher education. For those who did not plan accordingly, uncertainty associated with the transitional process produced anxiety and nervousness that participants expressed about transitioning from the military to higher education. G7 dealt with the anxiety and stress through proper planning and explained:

When I decided to retire from the military, it was something that I planned to do and I was ready for it. I mean, my wife and I had planned out a specific timeframe when it would be best to retire. This meant doing our homework about where we planned to live after life in the military and its cost of living, what school I was going to attend, and how we were going to pay for the education. Having a plan was essential for me because I had witnessed other airmen leave the Air Force without a plan and they had to go back into the Air Force because they could not survive.

Ensuring adequate time for executing a transition plan should decrease the anxiety and stress of transitioning from military service to higher education ensuring that there was enough time for executing a transition plan. G7 stated, "When I served in the Air Force, I made sure not to let my service define me," which helped her plan accordingly. G9 felt similarly as he stated that his transition from the military was a "family affair" because it would impact his entire family. "Transitioning from the military was a major step, therefore, I needed to treat it with the respect it demanded." G8 also felt similarly and stated, "Anybody who is in the military should

make sure they have a plan before they get out, or they will sell themselves short” and continued to detail his transition plan:

When in the military, every member is trained on how to plan a task or operation, and transitioning from the military to college is no different. Regardless if they are planning to get out immediately or suddenly, soldiers need to make a plan in advance so that they are prepared for when it comes. I know I didn’t think I would get to my 20 years so fast, but time flies, and before I knew it I had 16 years in and I made my plan at that point.

The time when military members are undertaking the transition process can be tremendously stressful, but proper planning can reduce transitional stress and anxiety. The process of transitioning from military service can be similar to the stress experienced in combat. G10 expressed that when she first entered the Army Reserves, she intended on serving a limited number of years. She stated that the stress that she felt in combat was “similar to what I experienced when I transitioned from the military to higher education.” G10 added:

I was so glad that I was able plan for my exit with short notice, but I wish I had prepared ahead of time...this way, when it happened, I would have been better prepared. I thought I was already used to the transitional stress because I had already experienced similar stress when I was in combat...however, with my lack of planning, I was even more stressed, so I had to deal with the unwanted stress.

G4 experienced a similar transitional stress as he was medically retired and did not take advantage of the time provided between when the medical review board started and completed reviewing his case as when the medical board review was concluded, he was processed out of the military.

**Managing the transition.** According to G9, “managing the transition was a tedious but necessary process that ensured my transition out of the military was smooth. According to Goodman et al. (2006), individuals who manage their transition will be better prepared for any eventuality throughout the transitional process. During the transition process, support was required from the military and higher education to make the process a smooth one. The transition process of departing the military involves benefits management (medical, dental, financial) as well as expectation management so the process can be undertaken smoothly. G9’s transition management required the input of his wife and children. He stated:

As I transitioned from the Army to college, I had to consider my wife’s situation as she was also serving in the Army and if she could not get an assignment where we wanted to go, then we would have to adjust our plans.

All of the interview participants had to manage their benefits according to the changes associated with their transition from the military to higher education. Instead of not being charged for their medical and dental benefits, retired and disabled military veterans had to pay for their benefits as they transitioned. G3 stated:

If it wasn’t for Medicare, I would be in bad shape because there is not a VA medical center near my home, so I have to travel over one hour just to see a healthcare provider...this placed a strain on me and my family. Medicare allows me to receive care closer to home without having to travel a long distance.

All interview participants received benefits when they retired, except for G2 and G5, who met their expiration-term of service (ETS) and no benefits came with their transition.

**Preparing to enter higher education.** The interview participants expressed similar sentiments about entering into higher education as they did about departing the military and

entering higher education, which was a totally different environment. The essence of this similarity was the necessity for those in transition to plan accordingly to enter the college of their choosing. G4 articulated that, when researching colleges to attend and in which program to study, military members need to research the school's accreditation. G4 explained:

When I researched my college, I checked with the VA to ensure it was a school that was approved by them and it was; however, when I started to look for employment, I noticed that most employers ask for degrees that are regionally accredited. Therefore, I checked on my college and discovered that it was not regionally accredited but that it was nationally accredited. Simply put, my degree would not be formally recognized because of its accreditation, so I had to start my program over at another school.

Entering higher education involves making detailed plans to ensure that the institution was properly accredited, while meeting the needs of the student. This means taking a look at multiple institutions and not just one, as the school may not possess the necessary support for military veterans. For example, since G5 was not able to plan his transition from the military to higher education accordingly, he selected a school that attempted to force him to take courses for which he had met the course equivalent through military service. G5 stated:

I did some research on a couple of local schools and was advised of a couple of schools who were known to work well with military; however, after I enrolled, I was being forced to take classes that were beneath my education level...and even after I had my military education evaluated and they gave me credit for some courses. The school wanted me to take a basic orientation that was geared for inexperienced students, and I did not agree with this. I could see if I was fresh out of high school, but I had been in the military for over ten years and taken numerous courses and been to combat, thus I felt I was mature



enough to handle the rigors of college and did not need this class. This conflict was resolved and I did not have to take the orientation course, but if I did not stand up for myself, they would have taken advantage of me.

### **Self-Awareness of the Transition**

For five of the ten interview participants (G3, G6, G7, G8 & G9), understanding that they would transition from military service to higher education allowed them to be successful during the transition process. According to G7, “I had to be prepared for my next career and so I prepared for the day when I was done serving in the military.” For G3, who served 20 years in the military, “Although I was going to get a military retirement, the medical aspect of my separation was stressful and I made sure that I had at least one retirement so I could leave the military without fear.” G9’s self-awareness of his transition from military service to higher education was uppermost in his mind. He stated:

Prior to enlisting in the Army, I sought the advice of other family members who had served in the military; therefore, I realized that the day would come when I would depart the military. Also, since my wife served in the Army at the same time that I served, we talked often about the day when I would retire and go to college.

**Personal characteristics.** Making a major transition or change requires courage and confidence, and being rational about all of the variables involved. Consequently, transitioning from an organization that has provided stability and security for a military veteran and their family requires wisdom and level-headedness. G7 articulated:

For me and my family, leaving the Air Force at the right time was our plan, but things do not always workout the way you plan them.... We originally wanted to retire in California and I had several job offers, but the house we were going to purchase was off

the market.... Therefore, we did not panic, and we went to our backup plan, which was Florida.

Additionally, influences discussed by Schlossberg, include other demographic characteristics that assist one's *Self* in understanding all potential influences of the transition. The age, ethnicity, experience, and socioeconomic status of the individual transitioning "bear[s] directly on how he or she perceives and assesses life" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 66). Individuals who are less experienced or from a low socioeconomic status tend to be "self-protective and are motivated to satisfy their immediate needs" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 70).

**Psychological resources.** Coupled with personal characteristics are the manner in which different individuals approach a similar situation. When transitioning from military service to higher education, no one individual will experience the transition similarly. "Ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, commitment and values" are all resources transitioning individuals call upon to guide them through the transition (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 69). In terms of ego and outlook on life, G8 said, "When I decided to leave the Army and go to college full-time, I realized it was time for me to look out for myself after I had given my all for my country." G2 stated, "Deciding not to take an opportunity to serve in the full-time Army was difficult to pass up, but I had to think about my family and also my future; and from that perspective, my decision became clear."

For others, such as G1, transitioning from military service was challenging because of his maturity level. He stated:

I had a difficult time at first with leaving the Army because I felt like my whole world had ended. Despite having my wife and son, I did not want to leave something that I really loved; but it all worked out for the best.

Even with the results of G1s medical review board providing him and his family with full benefits and financial support, he said, “If given the opportunity to serve in the Army again, I would give up what I got from my disability so that I could serve again.” G1 indicated that felt he did not have an opportunity to contribute more to society, and that serving in the Army was he could have served society.

### **Supporting the Transition**

Making the transition from military service to higher education is a significant action that demands support. Through the information provided by interview participants, Schlossberg’s 4S factor concerning *Support* was illustrated. Every participant expressed support for their transition from family, friends, or loved ones that assisted them during their anticipated or unanticipated transition. When G6 transitioned from the military, he stated his departing unit and arriving institution were very supportive and helpful. According to G6, “During my transition, I was fortunate to have support from my unit and my family because leaving the Army after 21 years makes you nervous about what will come next.”

**Personal support.** For all of the interview participants, having personal support during their transition made the difference in dealing with the change. G1 stated, “although I was medically retired, my wife and family provided me support that made the process much easier.”

G4 similarly stated that:

With all of my injuries, having a wife and children who cared deeply about me allowed be to deal with the stress of leaving the military...which was not easy to deal with, and I really had a hard time dealing with this transition.

G10 also was impacted greatly by the support she received when she was medically retired and transitioned to graduate school. She stated that, despite having a strategy to transition and a

designated timeframe, her parents were there to provide support so that the transition as much easier. So too did G9 express the need for a strategy and family support during and after the transition. G9 expressed:

I cannot tell you how important it was for my wife and me to be on the same sheet of music...with her providing support to me, it made it easier for me to transition from the military and then to college; without her support, I did not think it would have been as good as it was.

**Institutional Support.** From an institutional level, providing support involves providing services that the individual in transition can call on when needed. Higher education institutions can support transitioning military veterans through “seminars, lectures, workshops or simply discussion groups, aimed at assisting people experiencing particular transitions: midcareer change, divorce, retirement, or a return to school” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 76). G2 expressed the need for institutional support stating that “veterans need to ensure that their support structure was a part of their transition plans and also that the transitioning veteran was fully aware of what it means to enter higher education.”

Additionally, when planning to transition to higher education after military service, it was essential that military veterans conduct research regarding which school was or was not a good fit for them. Every school was not a good fit for everyone, and so making sure that the school they attend after military service is a fit means that institutions have the necessary knowledge and personnel to assist military veterans. During his transition, G3 stated that he explored several schools to see what his options were and then sat down with his wife to explain the situation:

I told my wife about the various schools that I was interested in and why I wanted to attend these schools. Then my wife said that she wanted to know if the schools I was looking at had services to assist veterans. I told her that I reviewed all of the schools, but she was more concerned about me rather than the schools. She told me, ‘You need to make sure that if you start this program, that you pick the right school for you and make sure that you remain focused.’

Interview participants were fully aware of the necessity to have the school they are going to attend supporting them in their efforts to obtain an education. Interview participants intuitively applied Schlossberg’s 4S model and its *Support* aspect in their transitional activities.

### **Transitional Situation Awareness**

According Goodman et al. (2006), every transition situation was different and will be influenced by the individuals involved and entails factors that influence the transition. Some factors that impact military veterans transitioning are: *Trigger*-what set off the transition; *Control*-what aspects of the transition can one control; and *Role Change*-does the transition involve role change? For military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education, the situation involved being in combat, preparing for retirement, or was impacted by chronic injuries or illnesses (Goodman et al., 2006). Transitioning from a structured environment to one that was not as structured was challenging and can be overwhelming if one is not adequately prepared. All interview participants expressed the need for military veterans to understand their circumstances for transitioning as a means for coping.

**Trigger.** For military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education, usually the trigger was a self-initiated retirement or expired term of service (ETS). However, another trigger that military veterans encounter was the medical review board (MRB). When an

MRB is initiated, it can occur suddenly and the military veteran has to face the reality that they may be disqualified for military service. For G3, who had served in the Army for over 14 years, his situation involved performing poorly during physical fitness training. He stated:

When I got medically retired, I was completely surprised. One-minute I was running fine during PT and the next I was breathing hard. Then they had me go to the hospital and two weeks later my medical review board had started and the doctor told in advance that I had better prepare to get discharged because of my condition.

The transition situation for G3 was organizational, but made him “look at myself in a different way ... forcing me to reevaluate my career.”

**Control.** Transitioning from military service to higher education involves change and being able to control every situation would be ideal. Military veterans who decided to retire or ETS were able to control their situation, thus transitioning when they desired. Conversely, those who go through the MRB process are not able to control their situation. G10 was in Iraq and had no plans of getting out of the Army so soon. She stated:

Things really changed rapidly. I was in Iraq and got injured, then I was flown back to the U.S. for additional treatment and a MRB was triggered. This took place in about six days, and I had no idea what was going on until I was conscience in the hospital and my commander and a physician came in to talk to me.

**Role change.** Possessing awareness of one’s situation when transitioning from military service to higher education was important. When transitioning, military veterans will be changing roles from currently serving to becoming a student. The emphasis on switching to an education environment was vital as focusing on what was required in higher education was important to being successful. G8 stated:

When I decided to leave the Army to go to school full-time, I was still in Afghanistan and when I told some of my buddies, immediately I received resistance to me leaving the Army. I had the retention sergeant constantly talking to me about staying in the Army and I got this treatment from when we left Afghanistan and returned to the U.S. It was tiresome, but I felt good because it was something that I was ready to do.

Situation awareness allows for individual rationalization of what will be occurring as they make their transition. This awareness involves “becoming familiar with the new roles, relationships, and routines” (Papay, n.d., p.4) during and after the transition.

### **Summary**

Overall, while all of the participants were mindful of the aspects of transitioning from military service to higher education, they also were cognizant of how this transition would impact themselves and their support structure. While undertaking this major transition, study participants’ situations coincided with Schlossberg’s Adult transition theory with anticipated and unanticipated transitions. While coping with their transition from military service to higher education (whether anticipated or unanticipated), the actions of interview participants further demonstrated the transition coping methods provided by Schlossberg’s 4S model. Study participant transitional experiences revealed linkage to Schlossberg’s 4S model.

Chapter 4 provided the profiles of the interview participants taken from the study’s online survey and summarized the participants’ experiences as expressed during the one-on-one interviews regarding their experiences transitioning from military service to higher education. The four themes that emerged from the data were: planning for transition (*Strategy*); awareness of the transition (*Self*); support during the transition (*Support*); and transitional situation awareness (*Situation*). The connection of Schlossberg’s Adult Transition theory and 4S model to

transitional experiences, revealed applicability to military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

This phenomenological study investigated the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education. Utilizing an online survey and a limited number of participant interviews, data was gathered about the lived experiences of the participants to understand how they transitioned from military service to higher education. This chapter presents an interpretation of findings, limitations, ethical considerations, and implications. The researcher will also discuss recommendations for future research.

#### **Interpretation of Findings**

The application of social constructivism (Amineh & Davatgari, 2015) to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (Goodman et al., 2006) and Schlossberg's 4S model (Anderson et al., 2012) provided the theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, the theoretical framework was applied to the participants' perceptions of their transition from military service to higher education. The findings were interpreted in the context of Schlossberg's theories.

#### **Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory**

Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory was a useful framework to analyze participants' reactions to and portrayal of their experiences transitioning from military service to higher education. The participants in this study were at different points in their lives as they transitioned from military service. According to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory, people often experience transitions in three areas: individuals, relationships, and in their work lives and those transitions may occur as Anticipated, Unanticipated, Chronic Hassles, or Non-events (Anderson et al., 2012). Research participants overwhelmingly experienced two types of

transitions outlined in Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory. The majority (76%) were able to transition out through planned retirement or expiration of term of service while 24% experienced an unanticipated transition when medical issues prompted Medical Review Board actions. To briefly reexamine the two experienced transitions, *Anticipated* pertains to major events that are expected to happen, such as high school, college, and marriage, while *Unanticipated* was an event that modifies a routine and cannot be planned, such as a crisis or death of a family member. Participants in this study either planned to retire after 20 years of service, or planned to depart the military after reaching the expiration of their service commitment (ETS) (both anticipated transitions), or they were medically retired from military service for being deemed disabled and medically unfit for military service (unanticipated).

Additionally, how participants in this study experienced their transitions was examined through the four areas in Schlossberg's 4S model: *Situation*-military service was ending and transition to higher education was occurring; *Self*-how the military veteran understood and dealt with the transition from military service to higher education; *Support*-the support the military veteran had when transitioning from military service to higher education; and *Strategy*-what strategy (if any) the military veterans applied to their transition from military service to higher education. Goodman et al. (2006) articulated that within each transition are stages each has to address to navigate their transition successfully. Transitional stage adjustments are constant throughout the transitional period. Each interview participant's transition was dependent upon varied circumstances and experiences thus resulting in different responses. This study highlighted the individual aspect of transitioning from military service to higher education and the impact of work-life in that transition. For example, 22 of the 38 participants had combat experience and that experience turned out to be a significant factor for transitioning from military

service to higher education because of the injuries incurred. However, for the five participants who did not experience injuries, this aspect of service was not influential on their transition.

As provided in Chapter 2, the application of social constructivism allowed the participants to construct their transition experience through participation in this study. One such example was G10. Medically retired, she indicated that although she had planned on transitioning from the military so that she could become a nurse, she "had to come to grips with the fact that her military career was over and that she would be starting her new career earlier" because of her injury.

The stories of participant experiences coping with their transitions allowed the researcher to demonstrate how Schlossberg's 4S Model can be applied to military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education. Schlossberg's 4S Model addresses how people cope with major transitions. *Strategy* deals with the manner in which individuals handle the transition, to include planning, coping skills and resiliency, while *Self* deals with the individual's life, strengths, and weaknesses they have in dealing with the transition. *Support* pertains to the resources the individual has in making the transition, and *Situation* pertains to the situation individuals are transitioning from and the situation they are about to enter.

Taking a social constructivism approach to explore the phenomenon of transition from military to higher education and using Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory and Schlossberg's 4S Model as the framework for this study, proved useful and provides for the following conclusions to be drawn relating to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory and 4S Model. The conclusions are presented in alignment with the themes identified during the analysis.

**Planning for Transition.** The first theme, Planning for Transition, correlates to Schlossberg 4S Strategy factor and was something military veterans ultimately have to consider as no person can

serve their entire adult life in the military. For military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education, planning for this transition meant being prepared. According to Anderson et al. (2012), “transition complexities often increase stress during major life transitions” (p. 48). In planning the transition, the majority of the participants utilized their training in military planning to formulate a plan to transition from military service to higher education. Participants (G6, G7, G8, & G9) reported that having a strategy and planning for their transition made the process much easier and less stressful. Despite a significant number of participants planning their transitions, multiple deployments, overseas service for extended periods of time, and constant training made planning more difficult.

For the participants that transitioned from military service without the benefit of planning, the transition process was challenging. Transitioning from military service to higher education by way of a medical retirement was a stressful process filled with uncertainties for several participants. Contained in this unanticipated transition were medical, dental and psychological reviews by professionals that ultimately determined the military careers of many participants. With the medical board process averaging between six to twelve months, the participants deemed disqualified for military service found themselves scrambling to determine what they would do post-military. Additionally, unlike the anticipated transition, participants could not anticipate what the medical board would conclude as the medical board process was inconsistent at best.

Schlossberg’s Strategies factor was articulated by Ryan et al. (2011) as strategies for “the development and utilization of support networks” (p. 56) and the way the individual in transition “effectively responds to challenges” (p. 56). The majority of the participants, those who experienced an anticipated transition, showed that they had a strategy for transitioning from the

military to higher education. Those who retired from military service (anticipated transition) were in more control than those who were medically retired (unanticipated). Those who retired from military service had a strategy to employ on the way to their retirement, and when they were ready, they chose to bring their military career to an end.

For medically retired individuals—many of who were without a strategy due to an unanticipated transition—this was not the case. G4 did not have a lot of time to develop a strategy as when he received notice of his MRB, he was advised that his illness would disqualify him for military service. The strategy aspect for G5 was similar as when he returned from being injured in combat, his MRB had already been started so he had to develop a strategy with little notice. Nonetheless, all participants opted to enact a strategy after they started their transition and elected to transition to higher education. The strategy of transitioning from military service to higher education for self-improvement, career advancement, and economic stability was a desire expressed by all participants. All study participants stated they had a strategy for transitioning from military service to higher education; however, some participant strategies were better than others.

**Awareness of the Transition.** The second theme identified: Awareness of the Transition, pertains to Schlossberg's 4S Model factor, *Self*. According to Schlossberg (1984), *Self* was an "individual's personal and demographic characteristics, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status" (p. 158). For military veterans in transition, the theme pertains to self-awareness of the transition process and how their personal demographics and their particular strengths and weaknesses influenced the transition. The transitions of the participants their awareness of it were different in nature. Participants who retired from the military by submitting their retirement (anticipated transitions) were aware of their circumstances and the people they

needed to interact with and had full control over what occurred. The transition took place on their terms. By submitting their retirement, these participants negotiated their transition and the interactions with the people in the military so that it was to their benefit. However, those who went through a medical review board were not aware of their transition or the people they needed to interact with in their transition from the military. The participants who were medically retired and have disabilities had a different perspective than those who did not. They were aware they would carry these ailments with them into the higher education setting, which might impact their ability to learn.

Additionally, those participants who were older demonstrated an increased need for stability as noted in their desire to remain in one particular area for long periods of time. For example, G7 was over the age of 50 and with his wife, sought stability after military retirement to go along with his education desires. Also, G4, who was medically retired, retired near his wife's home town to ensure support was nearby for him and his family. Conversely, those participants who were younger demonstrated more mobility and flexibility in their surroundings and living arrangements.

To accomplish a transition from military service to higher education, study participants were self-aware of the necessary adjustments for leaving one organization and entering another. Participants adjusted to "individual expectations and needs [and] to a new culture and structure that was less rigorous" (Anderson and Goodman, 2014, p. 41), thus demonstrating an understanding of the *Self* within each transition. Nonetheless, despite a significant number of participants being cognizant of their transition and planning their transitions, multiple deployments, overseas service for extended periods of time, and constant training made planning more difficult.

**Support During the Transition.** This third theme demonstrates the third factor in Schlossberg's 4S model, *Support*. Anderson et al. (2014) details Schlossberg's 4S *Support* factor as support available to the individual in transition, during the transition. Support for all of the participants was substantial during the transition from military service to higher education, and all of the participants expressed the importance of support during their transition. However, the support primarily was from the participants' inner circle of family, friends, and supporters. Support serves "as a key factor when transitioning," (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 43), and all participants indicated they had support from family or friends. Moreover, when entering higher education, all participants stated their institution also provided support; however, some institutions provided more than others.

From the military perspective, most of the participants stated that the unit they transitioned from was supportive of their transition from military service to higher education. Conversely, not all participants received support from their departing military organization. G2, G9, and G10 stated their military units were supportive of their transition; while G3, G5, G7, and G8 said they received no support. Specifically, G3 and G8 indicated that their units did not provide them with any information regarding available transition services, and they felt that the only support they had was from their family and friends. G3 and G8 agreed they felt isolated from the military when their units did not provide transition support, and the next thing they knew, they had been discharged as a result of an MRB. Occurrences where individuals in transition lost support, they often generate "feelings of isolation after they are discharged" (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 43).

**Transitional Situation Awareness.** The last theme illustrates the applicability of in Schlossberg's 4S factor, *Situation*. For those participants who had an anticipated transition,

being aware of their situation was essential to a successful transition. G6, G7, G8, and G9 expressed that being aware of what was ahead of them with their transition, assisted them greatly when the transition took place. Moreover, when entering higher education, G6, G7, G8, and G9 also indicated that understanding the higher education situation was important to having a successful transition.

Schlossberg's Situation factor was detailed by Goodman et al. (2006) as the event (whether anticipated or unanticipated) that has certain factors that influence the situation. These factors are Trigger, Timing, Control, Role Change, Duration, Previous Experience, Concurrent Stress and Assessment (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 65). For study participants, Trigger, Control and Role Change were prominent. In this study, participants expressed that the essential aspects of the participants' transitions from military service to higher education were (a) understanding the situation, (b) planning for a change in the situation, and (c) adapting to a new situation. This study highlighted the situation of transitioning from military service to higher education. For study participants, understanding that they would no longer be in the military was evident; however, when this would occur was a matter of perspective in that the manner in which they depart the military could vary. According to Schlossberg, there usually is a trigger that will precipitate the transition, and for the participants, the triggers were reaching 20 years of service, or the participant no longer being able to meet physical military standards, which generated a medical board review and ultimately led to an unanticipated discharge. For three of the interview participants (G1, G4, and G10), their situation entailed having chronic illnesses or injuries that warranted a medical board review. For G1, his situation involved being resistant to departing the military, and he wanted to remain despite being in pain on a daily basis. As for G4 had difficulty adjusting to his situation which involved his wife becoming the primary source of



income for his family when he was discharged on a medical retirement and being a stay-at-home father and full-time student. In the case of G10, her chronic illnesses were influential, she did not consider adjusting to her medical retirement as she stated that her parents supported her during and after her transition.

### **Limitations**

This study was restricted by several limitations for which explanations are needed. First, the study had a small number of participants for the online survey and the interviews, which constitutes a significant limitation. The recruitment of online survey participants proved more challenging than initially thought, hence the lower number of participants. It would be unrealistic to assume that every member of the organization where the online survey was conducted would meet every research parameter. However, a reasonable number of participants completed the online survey. Furthermore, the participants felt that if they were able to shed light onto the pros and cons of their experiences in transitioning to higher education, military veterans of the future could learn how to make the transition with fewer challenges.

The study was limited to Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education within the last five years. Additionally, not all branches of the military were represented in the study (Coast Guard), which may be viewed as a limitation; though the criteria for this study were not limited to specific military branches.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study may be used to help higher education and military decision makers review present military service member transitional policies and procedures or consider the development of policies, procedures, and programs for supporting this United States military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education.

The study was important because it demonstrates how the participants experienced the transition from military to college. The military veterans in this study benefited from anticipated transitions that allowed them time to plan for the transition (retirement or ETS); however, military veterans were stressed when the transition was forced upon them (dishonorable discharge) or when there was a long period of time with uncertainty (e.g., medical discharge).

For higher education, the findings of this study could impact retention levels of this student demographic. With institutional administrators constantly assessing retention rates of their students, the study's information can assist them in retaining their military veteran population. Further, an implication of this study for retention of this student demographic was the cost associated with retention efforts that may result from poorly executed transitions. Well-established military veteran transition programs, policies, and procedures may impact retention rates and reduce retention costs.

As for military institutions, military personnel, and military organizations, the implications are that under certain circumstances, military recruitment will likely be impacted as individuals considering military service will be drawn away because of anticipated transition difficulty and a lack of military veteran support.

For families of military veterans transitioning from military service to higher education, the implications are that, under certain circumstances, the transition for military veterans will be more difficult than in other life circumstances. Increased stress will likely strain relationships, and their role in supporting veteran family members in making the transition was critical to its success.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The research opportunities for investigating the lived experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans are plentiful; however, this study focused on the lived experiences of United States Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans who transitioned from military service to higher education. Nonetheless, studies of military veterans in higher education should consider the following areas: (a) military veterans who transition from military service to higher education and withdraw after one year, (b) military veterans who transition from military service to higher education and withdraw after two years, (c) the first semester experience of military veterans who transition from military service to higher education, (d) the first year experience of military veterans who transition from military service to higher education, and (e) two and four-year program retention rates of military veterans who transition from military service to higher education.

More than 2.6 million military personnel have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 and with their return from combat comes a desire to better their skills for a future transition from military service to the civilian work sector (Spencer, 2016; Tinoco, 2014-15). The number of women who served in the military and transitioned to higher education has increased along with the number of women serving in the armed forces. Therefore, further research focusing on women and their lived experiences in the first year of college after transitioning from military service was essential to solidify research concerning that student demographic.

Additionally, within a large number of United States Iraq and Afghanistan War military veterans are those who have suffered a TBI or are diagnosed with PTSD. With these ailments being prevalent in Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans, "for some returning veterans

with combat disabilities, it was difficult to transition to higher education" (Elliott et. al, p. 281) and their disabilities may impact their ability to learn. Therefore, research into the impact of these disabilities on veterans' transitions from military, as well as its application to women, will add to the body of knowledge for the military veteran student population.

### **Recommendations for Change**

Given the evidence that transitioning from the military into higher education requires attention to the four aspects of Schlossberg's 4S model, military installations and institutions must be proactive in providing transitional information for those service members that desire to transition to higher education. Being proactive means establishing one or more liaisons that are responsible for assisting service members transitioning to higher education. These efforts should include the development and implementation of programs that assist transitioning service members. Moreover, military installations should collaborate with local, state, and online institutions for the advancement of military veterans. Providing this assistance would benefit individuals who are interested in transitioning to higher education so that the lines of communication are firmly established to provide adequate information and assistance.

Military personnel must provide more support for those service members transitioning to higher education. When service members announce their intention to depart the military for higher education, military supervisors and peers need to support their desires so the transition is less challenging. For military organizations, leaders have a tremendous impact on those transitioning, as they have the power to aide or detract from the transitional process; therefore, military organizations need to provide increased support for the transitioning service members regardless of organizational needs.

Family members and friends alike wield a lot of influence. Therefore, they need to provide support and understanding to the transitioning service members as they undertake the transition process. Participants emphasized the importance of having family, friends and peers supporting them as they transitioned; therefore, unwavering encouragement can ensure the transition is successful.

Colleges and universities also need to be proactive in their efforts to support military veterans transitioning to their campuses. For institutions to be proactive, they will need to develop and implement ways to assist military veterans transitioning into higher education. This collaboration should include liaisons from the military community, veteran organizations, student veteran organizations, and institutional administrators. Participants in this study expressed the importance of having family members involved in their transition; therefore, institutions need to be inclusive of family members when they are developing military veteran transitional programs. Institutions should reach out to local and national not-for-profit organizations that provide assistance to military communities (e.g., Military OneSource, USA Care, VFW Axillary, etc.) and create an information bridge linking the communities. Also, once they get these military veterans on their campuses, they need to develop and implement formal military veteran retention programs that focus efforts on increasing military veteran retention through graduation or program completion.

### **Conclusion**

This study validates the application of Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transition and 4S model for United States Iraq and Afghanistan War era military veterans who have transitioned from military service to higher education. The study showed a need for increased understanding of the feelings and thought processes of military veterans transitioning to from military service to

higher education. While the application of Schlossberg's 4S model serves as a tool for coping with major transitions, understanding human emotions during transitions was equally in important. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of transitional preparation for military veterans, as common transitions from Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (*Anticipated* or *Unanticipated*) are prevalent when transitioning from military service to higher education. Moreover, this study specifies that within Anticipated or Unanticipated transitions, military veterans will be impacted by other *Chronic Hassles* or *Non-event* transitions (e.g., spouse, children). Also, this study demonstrates the coping mechanisms of Schlossberg's 4S model in action among the participants. This study provides first-hand experiences about the transition from military service to higher education and identifies things that aided or hindered their transitions. Also, this study provides understandings for military leaders and higher education administrators about the importance of assisting military veterans making this transition and demonstrates the importance of advanced transition planning by military veterans.

Additionally, this study specifies the importance of higher education support to retain this student population. Furthermore, institutions that offer online learning programs will need to be a part of the research parameters as "the next wave of military learner research must focus on military learner retention models encompassing multiple learning modes and delivery methods" (Ford & Vignare, 2015, p. 1). Through utilizing the 4S model, Anderson et al. (2012) expressed that employing this model provides individuals with transitional coping skills that allow for individual assessment prior, during, and after the transition. Revisiting the population of military veterans who have transitioned from military service to higher education and informing them of Schlossberg's 4S model may inform future transitioning military veterans of these tools to assist them in their transition. As with previous research into military veteran transitions, this study

helps shape the understanding of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory and the 4S Model (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Rumann, 2010a).

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## APPENDIX A STUDY INVITATION

March 2017

Dear Potential Study Participant:

As a doctoral student completing his dissertation study through the University of New England, I am inviting you to ***complete a survey and interviews to share your input on how U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experience transition from military service to higher education.*** As a military veteran, you have significant insight into what it was like to for U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans to transition from military service to higher education. This study focuses primarily on how U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experience transitioning from military service to higher education. This study includes an online survey and an interview to collect data pertinent to the research. Taking the survey should last approximately 40-45 minutes. After completing the survey, selected individuals will be contacted to participate in a semi-structured interview. By completing this survey, you are providing a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge affecting the experiences of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transitioning to higher education and everything undertaken during this process. Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. The survey can be taken at the following link: [https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/iraq\\_Afghanistan\\_survey](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/iraq_Afghanistan_survey).



## **APPENDIX B SURVEY PROTOCOL**

In order to gather information regarding the lived experience of how U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans transition from military service to higher education, this questionnaire has been developed to gather feedback regarding your experiences during your transition. I value your honest and detailed responses. The questionnaire should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participation in this survey is voluntary.

Age: \_\_\_\_

### **Gender identity**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

### **Ethnicity**

- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Native American or Alaska Native
- ☐ African American or Black
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ Caucasian or White
- ☐ Biracial/multiracial
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

### **School Enrollment**

- ☐ Currently Enrolled
- ☐ Enrolled (Last 2-Yrs.)
- ☐ Enrolled (Last 3 Yrs.)
- ☐ Enrolled (Last 4 Yrs.)
- ☐ Enrolled (Last 5 Yrs.)
- ☐ Graduated
- ☐ Not-enrolled

### **Student Status**

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Graduate Student
- ☐ Professional School

### **Enrollment Status (Courses Only, or Courses and Work)**

- ☐ Full-Time
- ☐ Part-Time

### **Primary Method of Course Delivery (Check all that apply)**

- On-Campus Classes (More than 50% of classes are conducted on campus)
- On-line Classes
- Hybrid Classes (On-Campus & On-Line)
- Distance Education
- Classes Held on Military Installations

Military Branch

- Army
- Air Force
- Navy
- Marines
- Coast Guard

Veteran Status

- Honorably Discharged
- Dishonorably Discharged
- Other Than Honorable Discharge
- Medical Discharge

Length of Service: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest Pay Grade Achieved

- ☐ E-1
- ☐ E-2
- ☐ E-3
- ☐ E-4
- ☐ E-5
- ☐ E-6
- ☐ E-7
- ☐ E-8
- ☐ E-9

- ☐ O-1
- ☐ O-2
- ☐ O-3
- ☐ O-4
- ☐ O-5
- ☐ O-6
- ☐ O-7
- ☐ O-8
- ☐ O-9

Have you ever deployed to a Combat Zone?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, were you directly involved in combat?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

When you first attended college, where did you live?

- ☐ On-Campus
- ☐ Off-Campus

Marital Status

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed

Number of Dependents

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ More than 7

Employment Status

- ☐ Full-Time
- ☐ Part-Time
- ☐ Not employed

Which form of aid are you currently using? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Chapter 30: Montgomery G.I. Bill
- ☐ Chapter 31: Vocational Rehabilitation
- ☐ Chapter 35: Dependent's Educational Assistance Program
- ☐ Chapter 1606: Montgomery G.I. Bill – Selected Reserve Educational Assistance Program
- ☐ Chapter 1607: Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP)

- ☐ Other
- ☐ Non Military Scholarships (academic merit awards)
- ☐ Federal Financial Aid (through FAFSA filing)
- ☐ I do not use any aid

**Type of School**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Public 2-Year College/University  | <input type="radio"/> Private 4-Year College/University |
| <input type="radio"/> Private 2-Year College/University | <input type="radio"/> Public Career/Technical College   |
| <input type="radio"/> Public 4-Year College/University  | <input type="radio"/> Private Career/Technical College  |

**Please answer each question Yes or No to the following questions:**

1. Was your transition from the military planned?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
2. Did you plan to attend college directly after serving in the military?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
3. Did your memories from military service impact your transition?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
4. Were you accepted immediately after applying to your education program?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
5. Were there other factors that impacted your military transition?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
6. Do you have any chronic injuries/illnesses?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
7. Has your transition from military service to higher education been easy?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
8. Did you feel supported during your transition from military service to higher education?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
9. Were you prepared to transition from military service to higher education?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No

**Please answer each question using the following scale:**

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

1. When transitioning into higher education, it was important for institutions to have a formal program welcoming military veterans

1      2      3      4      5

2. During my transition out of the military, I felt it was important for me to get a college education.

1      2      3      4      5

3. Once I had transitioned into higher education, I was glad I completed the process

1      2      3      4      5

4. During my transition into higher education, I was offered transition assistance by the school I was preparing to attend.

1      2      3      4      5

5. During my transition, I felt comfortable with the registration process.

1      2      3      4      5

6. I had difficulty applying for my financial aid during my transition period.

1      2      3      4      5

7. I had difficulty socializing during my transition into higher education.

1      2      3      4      5

8. I feel that military personnel respected me during my transition period into higher education.

1      2      3      4      5

9. I feel that civilian personnel respected me during my transition period into higher education.

1      2      3      4      5

10. I feel that higher education personnel respected me as a veteran during my transition period

1      2      3      4      5

11. After I transitioned into higher education, institutional personnel treated me fairly.

1      2      3      4      5

12. I identify as a veteran.

1      2      3      4      5

13. I identify as a disabled veteran

1      2      3      4      5

14. I am satisfied with my military transition to higher education experience.

1      2      3      4      5

This study includes a voluntary follow-up interview to allow the researcher to better understand the transition experience of military veterans going from the military to higher education. If you are willing to participate in an interview or would like more information about the next step in this study, please complete the following information:

Yes, I would be willing to participate in the follow-up interview.

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone:

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

**Title of Study:** A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of a Select Sample of U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan War Era Military Veterans Transitioning from Military Service to Higher Education

**Investigator:** Mark A. McKinney B. A. Communications, M. S. Public Administration, & M.S. Procurement and Acquisitions Management

This is a research study. Please take your time deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to understand the essence of the lived experience of how U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans experienced their transition from military service to higher education. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a military veteran who has transitioned from military service to higher education.

#### **PARTICIPANTS**

You have been identified as a potential participant in this research study because of your military service. In order to participate, you must be 17 years of age or older and you must have made the transition from the military to higher education within the last 5 years. If you have not served in the military or have not transitioned from the military to higher education, please notify the principal researcher as this will disqualify your research participation.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will be approximately three hours overall. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed. During the study you will be asked to take an online survey and then to meet with this principal investigator for an interview. During this interview you will be asked to answer various questions concerning your experience transitioning from military service to higher education. You will also be asked to clarify any points that are unclear and to identify any discrepancies you see in the principal researcher's analysis of the data. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable.

With your permission the interview will be digitally recorded. Only the researcher will have access to the digital recordings and all digital recording will be stored on a external storage device ('thumb drive'). The digital recordings will be used to record the interviews for transcription by a third party transcription service and for data analysis by the researcher and will be destroyed by 01/01/2018. Once the study report has been completed, the researcher will transport all digital recordings to Tampa Paper Shredding Service to magnetically degauss and pulverize the entire external storage device. The researcher will secure documentation of this destruction and maintain this record for a period of 3 years from the date of destruction.

## **RISKS**

There are no known risks associated with this research. However, while participating in this study, if you experience emotional discomfort discussing your military transition to higher education and military experiences, the researcher will refer you to local available resources for support. These resources include: Veterans Crisis Line at (800) 273-8255, and Orlando VA Medical Center at 1 (407) 631-1000.

## **BENEFITS**

If you decide to participate in this study, there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by assisting institutions of higher education in identifying how they can enhance the transitional experiences of military veterans who transition from military service to higher education.

## **COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

## **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. Further, if you decide not to participate, it will not impact your standing as a member of Fairways for Warriors.

A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal researcher for a period of 3 years after the research has been completed. Upon expiration of this 3-year period, all signed consent forms will be destroyed at Tampa Paper Shredding Service. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location at the principal researcher's residence and only the principal researcher will have access to the consent forms; the consent forms will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.



## CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may review your records. These records may contain private information. However, the principal researcher will be the only custodian of the research's documents. The information contained in the records will be coded, and pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant to ensure no one individual can be identified. All electronic data will be encrypted (using industry standards) and secured on an encrypted external storage drive located in the principal researcher's residence. Further, the researcher will maintain a locked file box for all research documents at his residence that he alone has access to. No individually identifiable information will be used in reporting this study.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: This principal investigator is the only person who will have access to the data for this study. If that data is not with the researcher personally it will be secured in a locked area. Digital recordings from this study will be erased by 01/01/2018. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

## QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study contact:

Mark A. McKinney, MS (Principal Researcher)  
Department of Educational Leadership  
(270) 205-4471, (954) 319-5332, or [mmckinney2@une.edu](mailto:mmckinney2@une.edu)

If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact:

Marylin Newell, PhD (Supervising Faculty)  
Educational Leadership  
(207) 345-3100, or [mnewell@une.edu](mailto:mnewell@une.edu)

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call:

Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D.,  
Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board  
(207) 221-4171 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

\*\*\*\*\*

## PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has

been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed)\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

### **RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT**

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

- Please describe what transition assistance the military provided you (if any).
- What were your college transition assistance expectations?
- What were your military transition assistance expectations?
- How have you coped with transitioning out of the military?
- Please describe your transition from military to higher education experience.
- Please describe the transitional assistance colleges provided you (if any).
- Please describe your strategy for your transition from military service to higher education (if any)?
- Please describe how you coped with transitioning from military service to higher education?
  
- Please describe the military situation you transition from as you entered higher education?
- Please describe the higher education situation you transitioned into as you left the military.
- What advice would you give to college faculty, staff, and administrators for working with transitioning military veterans?
- What affected your transition from the military to higher education?
- How has being in the military affected your transition to higher education?
- What was the reason you transitioned out of the military?
- Please describe what it was like to transition from military service to college.
- What advice would you provide someone who is transitioning from military to higher education?

**APPENDIX E**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION LETTER**



Institutional Review Board  
Olgun Guvench, Chair

**Biddeford Campus**  
11 Hills Beach Road  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207)602-2244 T  
(207)602-5905 F

**Portland Campus**  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103

To: Mark McKinney  
Cc: Marylin Newell  
From: Olgun Guvench  
Date: March 15, 2017  
Project # & Title: 030317-008, A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of a  
Select Sample of Iraq and Afghanistan War Era Military Veterans  
Transitioning from Military Service to Higher Education (Initial)

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the above captioned project, and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Additional IRB review and approval is not required for this protocol as submitted. If you wish to change your protocol at any time, you must first submit the changes for review.

Please contact Olgun Guvench at (207) 221-4171 or [oguvench@une.edu](mailto:oguvench@une.edu) with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Olgun Guvench", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Olgun Guvench, M.D., Ph.D. IRB  
Chair

IRB#: 030317-008  
Submission Date: 3/2/17  
Status: Exempt, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)  
**Status Date: 3/15/17**